

SCOTPRESS

MAKE IT SO 16

THE

DISTAFF
IDE

BY

DEBBIE LEE

A STAR TREK FANZINE

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Debbie Lee

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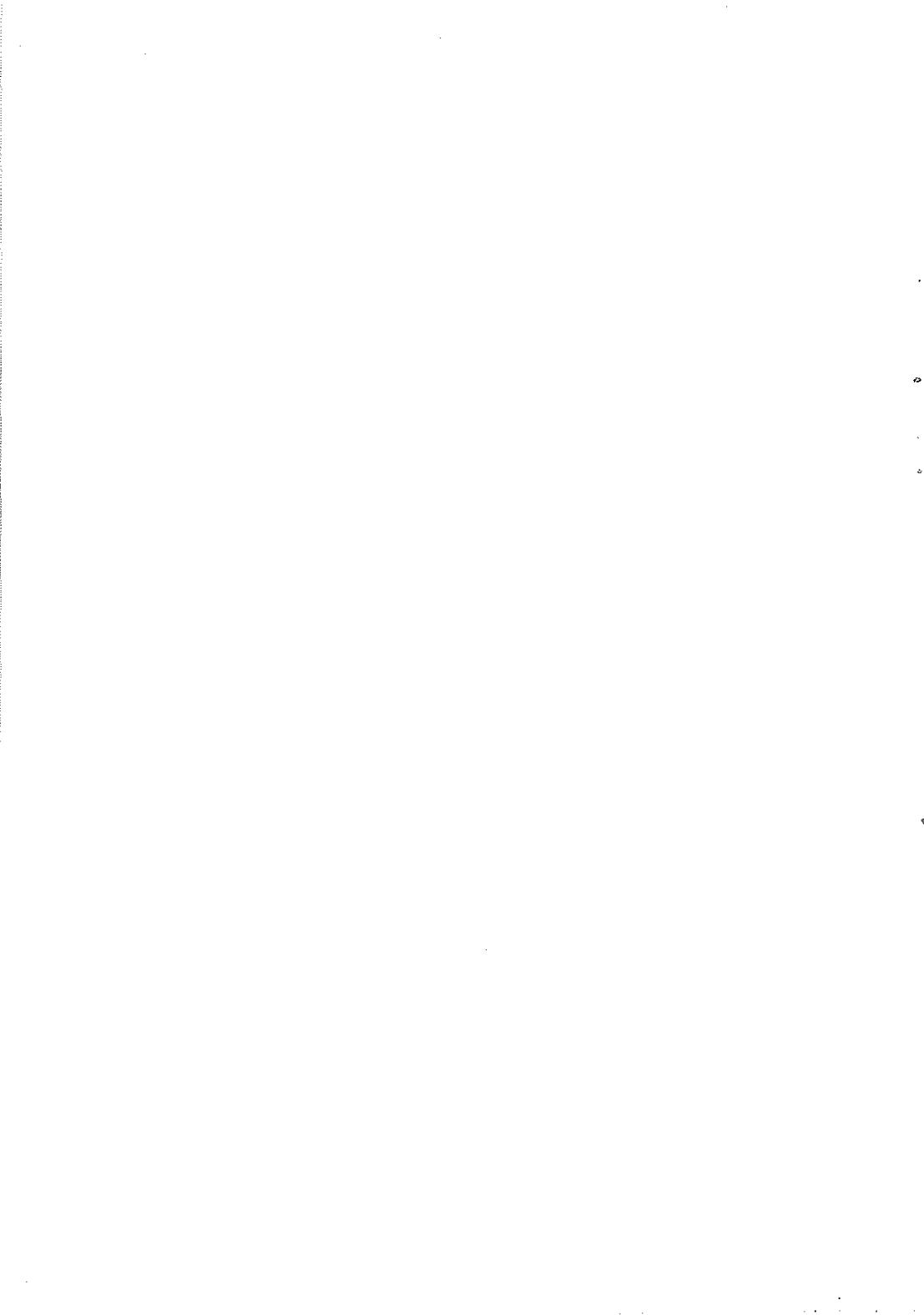
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THE DISTAFF SIDE

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Debbie Lee

"Women would rather be right than reasonable"

Ogden Nash (1902-71) US poet

Frailty, Thy Name Is a Misnomer

ONE

Captain's Log, Stardate 50410: En route to chart the gas clouds of the Achos planetary nebula, the Enterprise has been summarily diverted to pick up two parties bound for Starbase Lima as part of a Federation assimilation study. Our first party to embark includes an old acquaintance of mine, Patricia Evans, widow of Dr Jess Evans, who was foremost Federation expert in Starship control systems prior to his death three months ago from Darnay's disease. Mrs Evans would appear to be something of an unusual choice for an unusual project.

The preparation for our Achos visit proceeds as planned.

Commander William T Riker stood upon the Bridge, his arms folded, watching in the viewscreen the stretch of space ahead over Lt Commander Data's shoulder, as the android officer busied himself at Ops.

"What is the recomputed time for our reaching the Achos sector, Data, taking into account our newly scheduled stopover at Starbase Lima?"

"Slightly in excess of 72 hours and 30 minutes, sir," Data replied, his tone reflecting his utmost confidence in the accuracy of this answer.

"What! No seconds, Mr Data?" Riker remarked quizzically, then as Data turned his chair around to regard the First Officer, his mouth already forming the more accurate update to this answer, Riker quickly said, "No, on second thoughts, Data, that is more than accurate enough to answer my question!"

The hiss of the turbolift doors made Riker

turn to see who had just entered the nerve centre of the Enterprise, and was interested to see Captain Jean-Luc Picard striding from the lift down onto the main Bridge area; his bearing straight, his face set in an unusually grim line as he surveyed his command area before retiring to his command chair.

Riker walked over to sit down next to him on the Captain's right, leaning back and tugging at his uniform top.

"Our guests are aboard safely, Captain?" he enquired

"They are indeed, Number One. Mrs Evans was most keen to discuss the arrangements for certain aspects of the commencement of the assimilation study with Lt Worf. So I have left them in the holodeck area discussing 'settings', 'access', 'security', and the like."

"Have Starfleet given any indication as to how many people we are to expect, Captain?"

"Um... Five in the second party, two aboard now... seven in all, I suppose, Number One," Picard supplied absently. "Has Mr Data finished the preliminary study of the Achos sector yet?"

"Yes, sir. Only seven? Hardly a large enough sample to base an assimilation study on, surely?" Riker was puzzled; rarely content to accept information at face value, his keen mind was already seeking to understand any further ramifications of the small diversion the Enterprise was making from its original assignment.

"You may change your mind, Will, when I actually tell you of the nature of our second party due to board," Jean-Luc Picard replied in a low undertone, aware that every ear upon the Bridge was by now tuned in to their conversation, "and now may well be the time to appraise you of it.

Number One, would you like to accompany me to my Ready Room? Mr Data, you have the Bridge."

"Sir," acknowledged Commander Data, and preparing to leave his post at Ops, made way for his relief.

"So," Commander Riker started as he followed his Captain to the privacy of the Captain's retreat, "do enlighten me as to the nature of this second party due to board, Captain."

"Please sit." Captain Picard indicated a chair as he sat at his desk. "The second party is Syrenusae."

"Syrenusae? You mean Syrene? ...You have agreed to allow five Syrene to board the Enterprise, all at the same time?" Will Riker was incredulous. "Permission to speak freely, Captain."

"Always, Number One, you know that."

"Have you gone mad?"

A wry smile broke over Jean-Luc Picard's face as he heard his First Officer's words, for although they did not exactly paraphrase his response upon being hailed by Starfleet Command not three hours since, the sentiment was close enough.

"I sincerely hope not. Starfleet sees the transfer of the Syrene contingent to be a small chore, and one that the Enterprise is conveniently situated to carry out. If all goes well, it means a slight detour of some 12-18 hours to Starbase Lima, and then we can resume our original course for the Achos planetary nebula."

"If all goes well... That does have a good sound about it," commented Commander Riker dryly, "but why am I so sure that that is not going to be the case?"

"I count myself as a reasonably tolerant man, I like to think of myself as one of the broadest minded people you could hope to meet - but isn't the Federation aiming a little too high here, even for the UFP? These people are an itinerant group of unknown numbers, but a well known disposition. If they are not thieves, they are traders that even the Ferengi consider disreputable - or mercenaries... or assassins... the lowest common denominator on any number of fringe worlds you care to mention." Riker looked

at the Captain suddenly, his face concerned. "And what if one of them is an assassin with a target aboard this ship...?"

"Calm yourself, Number One. I am sure Mr Worf will ensure security is extremely tight once he is aware of the exact nature of our guests."

"You haven't told him yet?" Riker rolled his eyes, and put a hand to his temples.

"And it does not get much better, Will. in the forthcoming party, we will have a very special guest, Thelxepia of Achelous, who at 207 years of age is the oldest of the Syrene, and is thus nominated the delegation leader. As such, we have been instructed to treat her as a visiting dignitary and to indulge her wishes as far as possible within the scope of our brief, as a sign of the sincere intentions on the part of the Federation in this matter."

"Captain, I do not think it wise to allow them free run of the ship." Riker's face was grim, his words carrying a warning note.

"Agreed, Number One. Let us hope their requests are modest. The good news is that their visit coincides with a two day festival called the 'Yrice', during which time they want absolute privacy, and no contact with outsiders - which indicates to me that, hopefully, all five will be securely located in the chosen holodeck for the bulk of the journey."

"I was unaware that the Syrene actually observed any form of ritual or calling," Riker replied. "Yrice?"

"To be candid, Will, I was rather surprised also. That is apparently the whole point of this - nothing is known about this group at all as a race or creed; customs, ritual, lifestyle or even basic biological or medical data. But they are subject to extensive persecution and discrimination, and as they have no home world or system to give focus to their voice, until now any protest has gone unheard. The Federation is seeking to ally them with a suitably similar society, assimilating them into the Federation and so improve their lot."

"It is hardly in the spirit of IDIC, and furthermore... if this is a 'race', what of the Prime Directive... *Thou shalt not interfere with the development of another's society?*"

"I agree, Number One... but it appears to be something of a grey area in that the Syrene

ARE a distinct group within the structure of the Federation. And it would appear that some quango within the Federation has decided that this is the way forward - and if the Syrene are happy with that... who are we to argue?"

"And how much say does the race due to be allied with them get?"

"Good question, Number One. And one that I sincerely doubt has been aired quite yet."

The two men sat in silent contemplation for a few moments, dwelling respectively on the wisdom of good intentions. Both men knew that their room to manoeuvre on the matter, was, to say the least, limited as they had their orders from Starfleet, and they were there to serve after all.

"Worf to Captain Picard." The Klingon Chief of Security's voice boomed into the silence, even through the comparatively restricted medium of Captain Picard's communicator. "Captain, we are being hailed by Earth colony Omega XXI on a priority channel, Sir. The Governor of Omega is insisting that you receive his message immediately, personally. Shall I direct it through to the Ready Room?"

"Negative, Mr Worf. I will receive it on the main Bridge viewscreen."

Captain Picard stood, straightening his jacket with a sharp tug before indicating with his right arm that Commander Riker should precede him onto the Bridge. The Commander walked from the Captain's Ready Room straight to his command position; Picard followed him as far as the Bridge Ops console before turning to face the main viewer just behind Lt Commander Data's chair.

"Indicate I am ready to receive the Governor's signal now, please, Mr Worf," Picard said quietly over his shoulder to the Klingon at communications, not blinking an eye as the view of deep space was suddenly replaced by a very unflattering close up of a very warm looking gentleman showing all the ill effects of being somewhat corpulent as he mopped his sweat beaded brow with a puce coloured handkerchief.

"Picard! At last!" he blustered, his tone furious, his complexion red. "I would have you know that I do NOT appreciate being kept kicking my heels awaiting your reply in this fashion. Most shoddy, Sirrah, most shoddy!"

Picard turned on his heel to look at Commander Riker, whose eyebrows were raised with a little incredulity and some humour at the Governor's treatment of his Captain. Like all great men, Picard's response to such a tirade was unpredictable; however in this instance the Captain had obviously decided against taking offence.

"Governor. I am afraid that you caught me in the middle of a meeting." Picard's tone was that of one making a statement, not an apology. "In what capacity may the Enterprise assist you?"

"You will shortly be receiving an order, if you have not done so already, from Starfleet Command, directing you to remove certain undesirables from Omega XXI post haste."

"Governor... I am sorry, I did not catch your full name. Governor...?"

"Oliphant. Governor Mujos Oliphant!" the man shouted, his frustration clear.

"Governor Oliphant," started Captain Picard in a quiet, reasonable voice, "the Enterprise is already embarked upon two missions at present, so there is nothing to say that Starfleet will automatically assign this ship to address your problem. Naturally, as we are the closest ship to you in location, you may well have assumed..."

"*I demand you remove these... infidels from my planet now!*" roared the Governor, his face by now an impressive bucolic red. "This is not a satisfactory response to my request, Picard! I tell you now - I, Mujos Oliphant, am not without influence! Does reassignment to freighter supply work really seem so attractive to you in this late stage of your career?"

At this point it seemed as if the entire Bridge crew shifted their attention from viewscreen to their Captain in one fluid movement. Commander Riker found himself looking from the portly Governor Oliphant on the viewscreen to the ramrod-straight figure of Captain Jean-Luc Picard on the main Bridge, and having to give the Governor of Omega XXI a miserable 1/10 for his diplomacy in dealing with a man of Picard's calibre. The lone point was for the fact that he spoke Federation basic, although chances were that he might have had more success if he had spoken a language not understood by the Captain or the Universal translator, as he could not have done much worse. It would appear that it was Oliphant's

diplomatic skills, or rather lack of them, that had resulted in his being Governor of one of the UFP's gutter worlds, despite his claims of great influence.

"I will await my orders from Starfleet. Governor." Picard's response was silky smooth; only the sharp movement at his thumb indicating to Worf to cut the transmission revealed anything other than urbane professionalism.

"We are being hailed once more from Earth colony Omega XXI Captain," Worf informed his Commanding Officer.

Picard took a deep breath, released it as a long sigh, and went to sit in the chair of command, next to Commander Riker. Some moments passed, the Bridge crew's discreet attention focussed on Picard, and Picard's attention focussed on the main viewers display of deep space.

"Still hailing, sir," reported Lt Worf, checking the readings on the communication console.

Finally, closely scrutinized by Riker and Data, Picard stood and said in a curt voice, "On screen, Mr Worf."

The view of deep space was once more replaced by a figure in the Governor's Office on Omega XXI, but it was not Governor Mujos Oliphant's quivering jowls that now filled the Enterprise's main viewscreen. Instead, the lean, high cheekbones of a haughty-faced woman frowned down onto the occupants of the Bridge. Large almond-shaped eyes of the most viridescent green stared brazenly onto the Enterprise, with hypnotic clarity from within the fine-boned, almost elfin-featured face.

"Captain Jean-Luc Picard?" The voice was well modulated, cultured in tone and polite in its cadence, as it asked the question.

"Yes, speaking. I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Commander of the Starship USS Enterprise."

"Greetings to you, Captain Picard. My name is Aglaopheme of Sterope. I am one of the group that Governor Oliphant of Omega XXI is seeking to deport, and have been elected speaker."

"With all due respect, Aglaopheme of Sterope, I am afraid that my response to any

request made to remove you from that colony is the same as the one given to Governor Oliphant. Our present - "

"Captain Picard. Before you explain your position further, I think you may find our request actually has more to do with one of your current tasks than you would think."

Captain Picard remained silent at her interruption, an act which Aglaopheme of Sterope apparently took to be a sign to continue. "I understand that your next port of call is to be Tigris V, where Syrene Elder Thelxepia of Achelous is due to board for the purpose of discussion on the assimilation of the Syrene into the United Federation of Planets, correct?"

"That," Captain Picard finally answered, "is classified information and I think Starfleet would be most interested in divining your source, Madame. Governor Oliphant, perhaps?"

"Captain, please - and no, it was not Oliphant who divulged any information. You have just seen an admirable example of Mujos Oliphant trying to get what he wants, and I think you would agree, subtle it is NOT."

"Agreed," conceded Picard abruptly. "And so to your point?"

"My point, Captain Picard, is that I and five other members of the Syrene House of Sterope disagree with the moves being made by Thelxepia of Achelous and Mrs Patricia Evans - Aglaopheme spat out the Emissary's name as if it was a particularly bad taste in her mouth before continuing with an arid precise tone. "We consider their activities to be subversive, divisive and dangerous. I ask that you notify the official delegation immediately of our intention to attend the Yrice aboard your vessel; and furthermore, tell Mrs Evans in particular that she cannot avoid confrontation over the issue of assimilation by furtively hatching secret meetings aboard Starfleet Starships, however deep in space they may be. I await the official delegation's reply, Captain Picard. I think you know where to reach us."

The transmission was ended as abruptly as the Captain's original contact with Omega XXI had been some moments earlier, leaving the viewer filled only with the slow moving starscape of the Enterprise's present course, and the background noise of ship's systems.

Commander Riker released his breath in a

low rush through pursed lips. "It would appear that there is maybe more to this modest Syrene study than first meets the eye, Captain." Moving with deliberation, Riker had moved to stand beside his Commanding Officer in the middle of the main Bridge area.

"But if they genuinely have something to contribute to this gathering, then they should be made equally as welcome. Do you not agree, Commander? I can see no justification in denying their attendance."

Riker pulled a considering face, and then nodded his agreement, briefly, almost abruptly.

"Then I shall notify Starfleet of this development immediately, Number One, and await further instruction. Some cursory study... it is developing all the telltale signs of a cultural debate - and so much for a routine, non-essential mission. Mystery, conflict, a hint of political intrigue. All very mundane."

Picard smoothed the back of his head in a habit he tended to assume when matters were taking a fast turn for the more complicated.

"But it is just what we need to keep us on our toes, sir," Riker responded with a small smile. "Eleven Syrene... all on board the Enterprise. All at the same time. Will there be any additional arrangements you wish made for the second party?" He paused momentarily before adding, "And are you going to inform Mrs Evans of this latest development Captain, or shall I?"

"I think this is a job," Picard replied firmly, "for Counselor Troi."

Deanna Troi, ship's Counselor and mediator aboard the Enterprise, strode along the Enterprise corridors towards the Emissary's quarters. Her purposeful gait brooked no interference, but she had a nod and a smile for virtually everyone she met on her way, for she had come into contact with most of the ship's crew in some capacity or other. But as she drew nearer to the guest quarters her steps slowed, and a frown creased her brow.

"Mrs Evans?" she hailed using the door comm. "It is Deanna Troi, Mrs Evans."

No answer. Deanna then repeated her hail to no effect. Finally, the sound of raised voices managed to escape even the soundproofing of

Starship cabins, and Deanna jumped as she heard the clear sound of a fragile object being smashed. Automatically her Starfleet training cut in and she reached for her communicator. "Counselor Troi to Ship's Security. I may require assistance in the guest quarters immediately."

She paused long enough for Security to return an acknowledgement before allowing her Betazoid curiosity to get the better of her and tempt her into using her empathic powers to tune in to the arguing minds and voices within the cabin.

Deanna gasped as she opened her mind to the duelling personalities beyond the closed doors, sensing white hot anger, pain, betrayal, fury and fear. An amazing spectrum of passionate emotion hit Deanna Troi's empathic senses with the force of a runaway freighter. But worse was to come, for just as the maelstrom appeared to be at its zenith, a telepathic blip knocked Counselor Troi's thoughts straight out of her head, and the Counselor backwards onto the floor of the corridor, senseless.

"I think she is OK... Hey, Deanna!"

A gentle hand patted her cheek as the grey fog started clearing from her mind, and Deanna blinked her eyes against the harsh, unsympathetic lighting within the Starship corridors.

"That's it, come on, wake up. You're blocking the corridor and causing something of a stir, Ms Troi."

Deanna moved a hand to her sore head and smiled weakly in spite of herself as she slowly focussed on the unmistakeable red hair of Dr Beverly Crusher bent over her emergency med pack, putting away bits and pieces, her med scan still in her hand.

"Do you feel well enough to walk to sickbay Deanna?" Beverly's voice was crisp and professional. "If you do not, just say and we'll transport you."

"No. No, I am fine. I can walk," Deanna insisted as two officers from Security helped her to her feet, and she swayed there once released. "Wow, is my head sore."

"All the more reason for us to have a little look-see. Here, grab my arm... it's not too far."

Beverly Crusher tucked her arm underneath the Counselor's delicate elbow and steered her down the corridor, trying to balance a sensible speed with undue haste. She signalled with her head that she would like one of the security detail to accompany them as they headed off in the direction of sick bay.

"So, then, Counselor Troi," said Dr Beverly Crusher once her patient was safely ensconced within the folds of one of the examination beds in sick bay. "Care to tell your friendly neighbourhood Doctor what brought this attack on? Any working theory will do... Although, all joking apart, are you feeling a little better now?"

"I am fine Beverly, really, truly!" Deanna sat with her feet upon the examination bed trying to suppress the feeling of being a complete and utter fraud. "In fact I am so fine I should not even be sitting here taking up one of your valuable beds."

Deanna went to swing her feet down onto the floor, but found her movement neatly blocked by the deceptive strength of Dr Crusher's arm.

"Whoa! Hang on there a moment. Examination first, *then* you get to check out, not before. See, that's how a sickbay tends to work, Counselor." Dr Crusher reprimanded her, mock-primly, whilst shining a light probe into her eyes. "Now blink."

"Beverly!" Deanna half laughed with real impatience, but blinked all the same. "I was on an important errand for the Captain - I can't go and put my feet up half way through!"

"Okay, so you'll do it ten minutes later than you had intended, Counselor. You are not the only one with a job to do here. Any problems, send Captain Picard to see me."

Beverly gave her a theatrical frown, before shutting off her probe with a decided click. She then spun on her heel and walked off in the direction of her office, passing Nurse Alicia Ogawa as she went.

"Watch her, Alicia," she said as she strode past.

"Yes, Doctor!" laughed Alicia, walking towards Counselor Troi. "Hi, Deanna..."

Commander Riker and Worf stood upon

the Bridge, their expressions preoccupied as the young Security Officer reported the disturbance both outside - and inside - the Federation Emissary's cabin shortly before.

"And Counselor Troi... Is she all right?" questioned Commander Riker, his brows drawn together into a frown.

"Dr Crusher was hailed as soon as we found the Counselor, sir," said the young Security Officer, wishing that he did not have to be the unfortunate member of their team in possession of the facts right from the time when Counselor Troi had been found unconscious in the middle of the corridor - the net result being that he had been summoned to report personally to his commanding officer as well as the ship's First Officer, on the Bridge.

"I will check with Dr Crusher on Counselor Troi's status," Riker informed Worf as their relieved messenger was finally dismissed. "Well, Mr Worf, what do you think?"

"I would be happier if I was in possession of Counselor Troi's version of events, sir. Mrs Evans maintains that she was having a small disagreement with her daughter, and so did not hear either Counselor Troi's hail or her fall," Worf replied, his voice low.

"It seems rather unusual that they did not hear anything, if the comm was open and the disagreement was as small as they say it was," commented Commander Riker dryly.

"As soon as the Counselor is available, I will discuss these events with her," Worf stated. "At the moment both the Counselor and Dr Crusher have business with Mrs Evans. The CMO has just completed the embarkation medicales of the Emissary and her daughter."

"Good. Keep your eyes open, Mr Worf. There is something not quite right here..." Riker smoothed his close cropped beard before adding, "It may be worth while checking your no doubt very efficient security measures one last time before the second party arrives, Lieutenant."

"Sir... I already have, twice," Worf growled in reply

Counselor Deanna Troi and Dr Beverly Crusher made their way to the door of the Emissary's quarters and paused before

admittance.

"Here goes." Deanna smiled hesitantly at her Doctor colleague before using the door comm to hail the Emissary.

A bit like someone returning to a badly lit firework... thought Dr Crusher wryly as they finally gained admittance.

The only person evident was Patricia Evans herself, who was picking up a flower display from the floor, along with what must have originally been its ceramic container.

"You have had an accident?" asked Troi, her voice reserved.

"Yes, Counselor, something like that," said Patricia wearily.

"I thought I heard a disturbance when I called earlier," she said. "There were some very angry voices in evidence."

"You heard?" Mrs Evans suddenly seemed very guarded.

"Indeed. In fact I was the one who summoned ship's security," Deanna added candidly.

"Oh... I see."

"Is there anything that you or your daughter want to discuss, maybe with myself as a disinterested third party, Mrs Evans?"

"No, there most certainly is not."

Beverly Crusher and Deanna Troi exchanged glances, an act that did not escape Mrs Evans' notice.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong, Counselor, honestly. But I do thank you for your concern." Her tone of answer was frosty

"Well, in that case, the main reason for my visit, Mrs Evans, is that Captain Picard asked me to inform you that he has been hailed by a group of Syrene on Omega XXI, led by an Aglaopheme of Sterope. They are intending to join your party aboard the Enterprise for the Feast of Yrice, and Captain Picard can see no reason to deny them that, subject to clearance by Starfleet, and, of course, yourself."

Dr Crusher watched the Emissary closely,

By God, but her poise is good! thought Beverly. *Not a murmur, not a pause, almost as if she was not fazed by this unexpected request at all.* But something, maybe that often disregarded sense of intuition, told Beverly Crusher otherwise.

"Wonderful." She smiled urbanely, *her face almost like a glittering mask*, thought Deanna, privy to other thoughts emanating from beneath it thanks to her empathic senses. "I look forward to them coming aboard."

A sarcastic laugh from the far end of the living quarters almost shook this composure, but not quite.

"How fortunate, mother," came Lucy's voice. "It's going to be quite a lively party with both Agla and yourself to meet the old buzzard of Tigris."

"Lucy!" Her mother's voice was like chilled steel. "You forget yourself!"

"I just find it amusing. The number of people that wriggle out of the woodwork when they think things are about to rock their own safe little boat. Otherwise they do not give a damn." Lucy turned to retreat once more into her sleeping quarters, her beautiful face set in an artful smile. "But then I am lucky enough to have a mother who has time for such good works - one who is prepared to show, by example, no less, what could be done for such an ill-done-by race as the Syrene if people would only take the time to UNDERSTAND them! Such altruism... such generosity of soul... Am I not the LUCKIEST girl alive?"

"Enough!" snapped Evans, for the first time appearing truly rattled by events. But all that answered her was the mocking sound of Lucy's laughter from behind the yet again firmly closed cabin doors.

"She is at that awkward age," Evans murmured uneasily.

"You're telling me," responded Beverly Crusher, regarding the closed doors with some reservation, obviously recalling Wesley's teenage years and wondering at the comparison.

"I think... we need some time alone," Evans finally managed. "If you would be so kind as to... leave us?"

"Of course," both Deanna Troi and Beverly Crusher chorused, relieved at being given the

ideal exit from such an uncomfortable situation.

Once outside the cabin, Deanna stretched up an arm to lift her thick hair from the back of her neck and ease her shoulders.

"What a dreadful child," she marvelled as the two of them started down the corridor. "It sometimes amazes me what Human children are allowed to get away with compared to the way I was brought up by my mother."

"Human?" Dr Beverly Crusher's attention was back on her companion.

"You know, Dr Crusher, Human - as in adolescent, young, rebellious, Human Being!"

But Dr Crusher's response was to shake her head firmly. "No, Deanna." Beverly Crusher pinched her lips between finger and thumb. "Having received the results of both their compulsory boarding medicals was why I insisted on accompanying you to the Emissary's quarters."

"But an embarkation medical is normally just routine procedure... isn't it?"

"Well, on this occasion I thought it might be prudent to discuss the results with Patricia Evans."

"Why?" Deanna prompted, stopping in her tracks to turn and look at the Chief Medical Officer.

"Although the medical was positive for general health and lack of infection, it also told me that whatever they are... Human they are not."

"Then, Beverly, what ARE they?"

"At a guess - or more like pure conjecture - I would say that the Emissary and her daughter may well be Syrenusae. But then due to lack of medical data, standard Syrene physiology is a matter of pure conjecture anyway," the Doctor answered with a frustrated shrug of her shoulders.

Commander Riker stared down at the length of the ebonite table at the assembled familiar faces of the senior members of staff from his customary position to the right of Captain Picard. It was not often that William T Riker

wished for abilities other than those he was already blessed with, but this was one occasion when he wished he had some Betazoid blood, with its associated empathic ability, running in his veins, so that he could divine the real source of the discord in the meeting before him at present.

Riker would often quite consciously act to buffer his Captain from the extremes of response on command decisions, and to share in the fielding of feedback, as he knew from his own experience that command decisions were, by their very nature, difficult to make and often even harder to justify. But on this occasion he was beginning to feel at something of a loss, although he allowed himself a small smile of consolation when he realised that even the erudite Counselor Troi was feeling somewhat powerless in the face of the clash that was taking place before them.

Ordinarily Beverly Crusher was the model Chief Medical Officer, making the towering arguments that used to occur between Katherine Pulaski and Jean-Luc Picard during Dr Crusher's year-long absence from the Enterprise something of a distant memory. She would rarely disagree with the Captain's decisions, and neither would the Captain seek to interfere in her work, both having a strong professional respect for each other built up over the years, but there were exceptions to this harmonious rule - as on this occasion, for when resources were tight and the Doctor felt humanitarian issues were being pushed to the rear, she could be guaranteed to come out fighting.

Similarly, as the rather complex mixture of orders recently sent to them by Starfleet were still the official line, Captain Jean-Luc Picard was prepared to defend his interpretation of them to the last.

Ironically, Riker mused, if the Captain just paused for a few moments to actually take a board Beverly's passionate argument, he would probably agree with her. But the Captain so rarely had someone prepared to disagree with him that it seemed almost a shame to stop the two participants of this particular skirmish too quickly.

Beverly Crusher had warmed to the cause of the Syrenusae study with something of an almost evangelical interest, and her ability to somehow perforate Jean-Luc Picard's almost regal shell had resulted in one of the most confrontational meetings Riker could remember having been a party to aboard the Enterprise. It had started some time ago, innocuously enough,

with a discussion as to the Achos planetary nebula and details of senior crew assignments to Picard's favoured project.

"Mr Data, I would like you to work with Mr La Forge and Chief O'Brien on some of the finer modifications to the ship's sensors being made for the study...."

"Captain, I had rather hoped that Data would be working with us - that is, Counselor Troi and myself - on starting on the Syrenusae study prior to their disembarkation at Starbase Lima," Beverly Crusher objected firmly.

"Doctor, I would remind you that we are responsible only for the initial stages of this very... *interesting...* assimilation project." Picard shaped his words as if they were unwelcome. "The bulk of the research work will be done, and properly so, using the facilities and resources of Starbase Lima."

That had been it. Riker had caught Troi's eye as he slunk low in his chair, and she had raised her eyebrows at the almost visible capitulation to the forthcoming storm. *Oh no,* Riker's resigned attitude seemed to say, *the Captain has started this one, and I am sure he is more than capable of finishing it as well.*

"Well, I wish I could be so certain that the project will get that far, Captain," Beverly responded quickly. "The unexpected opposition to the assimilation study could be all that is needed to send the various participants scuttling back to their respective corners of Federation space, with us none the wiser, before Starbase Lima is even within transporter range!"

"Dr Crusher, we are a Federation Starship. Our job is the exploration and scientific study of space, not social work better left to those Federation personnel who would have the Enterprise functioning as an intergalactic taxi service!"

Data looked at Geordi, as if to say something, but the Chief Engineer signalled him to stay quiet with a small shake of his head.

"We cannot afford to indulge ourselves in the luxury of prevarication and delegation. In this instance, Captain, we should be doing as much research as we possibly can... and now!" Dr Crusher insisted.

"Doctor, we have neither the resources, nor the time at present, to indulge ourselves on

this project or any other... and do it justice," Picard answered. "Leave this one to the experts."

"Experts!" exploded the Chief Medical Officer.

The following ten minutes was an education for the uninitiated in the finer points of debating Starfleet regulations and verbal point scoring. Riker's ears finally pricked up when it sounded as if the Doctor had realised that she would never win an all out victory against the Captain in his present mood, and was aiming for position of honourable runner up with 95% of what she originally requested.

"The medical team aboard this ship is second to none in the disciplines this project is crying out for - we could continue the study in addition to our other duties. All I ask is that you give us Data. He would be invaluable in the coordination of psychological and physiological studies with known sociological data. God knows we could do with his speed, now so more than ever."

"It is conceivable that I could work on both projects simultaneously, Captain," Data interceded, the first of the Bridge crew to have spoken other than CMO and Captain in this meeting so far. "As I do not need to rest for the same period of time as other crew members, I could split my day into two twelve hour shifts, concentrating on one project per shift."

Commander Riker glanced at Picard. He, personally, did not like Data to push himself to the limit of his abilities in this way, which in another lifeform could be considered excessive. To take advantage of him in this way, however willing he was, because he was an android, did not rest well with Will. Nor with Captain Picard, it would seem, as he took one of his characteristic deep breaths and released it as a short sigh, his wry glance at the CMO not missed by others present.

"That will not be necessary, Mr Data. You are assigned to Dr Crusher's team... subject to review," he added in a warning tone to the Doctor

"Thank you, Captain," said Dr Crusher quietly.

"So how will you proceed, Doctor?" Riker asked, sitting forward in his chair, aware that the clearly signalled compromise meant that the meeting was now ready to resume.

"First of all we have to get the agreement of the Syrene themselves. The reason so little is known about them is that they have done an excellent job of eluding any form of medical study or biopsy for a long, long time. Their apparent amazing health combined with a mistrust of anything and everything that may intrude into the secrecy that surrounds them has served them well."

"Doctor, there is something that has been puzzling the hell out of me." Geordi La Forge spoke up from the end of the long, conference table. "There has been no mention of any Syrene men. So far I haven't heard or seen any evidence of any males of the species. Any idea why?"

"Excellent question, Geordi," Beverly congratulated him, "and it's going to be the question on the top of my list too. It may be that Syrene male children are too weak to survive, or that they have some fatal flaw in their genetic makeup that means they are never a valid birth prospect. Alternatively, the Syrene may have some form of self fertilizing hermaphrodite metabolism, although they have been accused by some races of ceremonial sacrifice and consumption of..."

"Ahem." Captain Picard cleared his throat and directed a clear, straight look at his Chief Medical Officer.

"...but of course you probably don't want to hear about that right now."

Beverly finished, somewhat lamely, whispering to Deanna some time later that she now knew how Data must feel when cut off in full flow.

"What facilities have been arranged for the Syrene contingent, Mr Worf?" Picard asked his Chief of Security.

"Holodeck 3 has been programmed to Emissary Evans' strict specifications regarding the setting of the Yrice. In addition, the doors have been adjusted to respond to secured computer input only. All manual and local control systems have been temporarily put offline, save emergency systems. Two armed guards will be in attendance outside holodeck 3 at all times, each on specifically short duration duty."

"Excellent, Mr Worf. Has anyone else anything to contribute whilst we are on the subject of the 'Yrice?'" questioned Picard.

"Mrs Evans briefed me as to the start and duration of the ceremonies surrounding the Yrice, and upon Thelxepia's embarkation, the ceremonial period can be expected to start within the following 48 hours for a total period of two days." Deanna turned to Dr Crusher who was listening quietly to this. "The two day observation of the Yrice is clearly going to preclude any study during this period."

"Then the arrival of Thelxepia of Achelous would appear to mark the start of our duties in earnest. Thelxepia of Achelous is considered by the Federation as a visiting dignitary of the highest order, and is to be accorded the respect and amenities that go with that honour." Picard turned his gaze onto the Doctor. "Dr Crusher, as Chief Medical Officer I will expect you to attend to our guests' needs 24 hours a day, personally if needs be. At well in excess of 200 years of age, a Doctor to hand may be advisable." Seeing Dr Crusher about to protest, he raised his hand. "Consider it a perfect opportunity to study one of the most eminent of the Syrene race at close quarters Doctor. It may even allow you a glimpse of their very private ceremonial rites."

"It is somewhat curious that there is so little record of the Syrene observing any form of ceremonial or religious ritual, save one obscure reference in the ancient manuscripts of Miseris," commented Data, his head tilted to one side as he continued accessing his vast store of knowledge. "Indeed, the very origins of the Syrenusae are clouded in mystery, with very little by way of substantial fact. Most factual records pertaining to the Syrene involve wreaths and criminal..."

Picard raised his eyebrows slightly at his third in command, which Data correctly interpreted as a signal to pause in his recitation.

"From my limited knowledge of the Syrene, as regards this project Mr Data, their names bear a curious similarity to those found in the ancient classics, those of Homer and the tales of Orpheus."

"Indeed. Fascinating." Data's interest was obviously piqued by this new avenue of research. "Creatures of ancient earth mythology, half women, half birds or malevolent monsters of the sea. They feature prominently as agents of vengeance or death."

"Which is all very well... but what puzzles me is why Patricia Evans was chosen by Federation Officials as their representative in this assignment," Riker told the assembled meeting.

"Agreed. Number One, I find myself becoming even more uneasy as it becomes clear that this is obviously a task requiring no little skill in the art of negotiation," Picard replied.

"How much do we actually know about Mrs Evans that qualifies her for this role?" Riker asked quietly, his face concerned. "All I know about her is that her husband was Dr Jess Evans, who surely everyone must at least have heard of within UFP and Starfleet technical."

"How could they not have?" concurred Geordi. "The technical guru of control interaction, specializing in linkage and feedback of control within star class vessel systems software when it was still an art rather than a skill. The man was a genius."

"Jess Evans died of a severe wasting disease, an acute form of Darnav's, according to records on the Vulcan colony-planet which was the Evans family homeworld for the last 16 years," Data informed them. "Little else is known, apart from there being a son George, aged eight, in addition to Lucy, from their marriage."

"So there is nothing else?" Riker asked.

Deanna wondered whether to speak out, but she was aware of Beverly Crusher's silence and debated if to do so was in fact a breach of professional confidentiality to their guests, on the part of both of them. But, surprisingly enough, it was not Dr Crusher's voice that broke the silence, but Captain Picard's.

"Patricia Evans was at Starfleet Academy for two years, but left to marry Jess Evans before she graduated," he said, somewhat reluctantly.

"Really?" Counselor Troi glanced at Dr Crusher quickly as she moved forward in her chair. "Captain, I had no idea. You know this is nowhere on her personal file. Are you quite sure?"

"Of course I am sure - I was damn well there at the time!" Picard snapped somewhat irritably. "And I hope for all our sakes that the woman who is acting as Emissary aboard my starship is somewhat more mature than the girl who attempted to fly a shuttlecraft upside down into a gravity field!"

"She what?" Troi and Crusher exchanged glances that showed they were both trying to reconcile the image of the austere, raven-haired

woman in the guest quarters with someone prepared to commit such an act whilst in Starfleet uniform. "What on earth for?"

"To prove me wrong!" Picard bit out and his jaw clamped shut in such a way that his colleagues realised he was not about to divulge anything more on the matter.

"Then..." Deanna Troi spoke slowly and precisely. "I think Patricia Evans is uniquely qualified for the job of Emissary in the Federation dealings with the Syrenusae contingent."

All the meeting, save Dr Crusher, looked at the Counselor in some surprise.

"She is obviously committed to the principles of the United Federation of Planets, else why would she have originally joined Starfleet Academy? And, if I make so bold, the fact she was accepted, says much about her psychological make-up that reassures me."

"I agree," joined in Beverly Crusher, obviously deciding that the Captain had a right to know, now, of the implications of the medical results. "And where else would the Federation be fortunate enough to find a Syrene committed to the principles of the UFP?"

"The Emissary is Syrene?" Worf boomed. Riker and Picard looked at each other with a mixture of alarm and astonishment.

"How long have you known this Doctor?" Picard fixed the CMO with a steely glare, but Dr Crusher was not about to be so easily intimidated.

"Not long, Captain. I was about to inform you of the results in a formal report," she answered promptly. "It will be on your desk after the meeting."

"I look forward to its arrival," Picard replied succinctly.

"Twelve Syrene?" Riker put his head in his hands and moaned.

"Thirteen, actually, Will. Lucy is Syrene also."

"My God... I had no idea," Picard murmured faintly as the realization started to sink in.

All that could be heard from Will Riker

was a groaning noise, until he finally lifted his head from his hands and looked across at Worf.

"I hope you are not a superstitious man, Mr Worf," he said

"No, I am a Klingon. And there is a Klingon saying... 'superstition is the religion of feeble minds'." growled Worf across the table width, "and a warrior's mind is NEVER feeble!"

TWO

Beverly Crusher waited in a position as near enough to attention as she was ever likely to get, her hands clasped behind her back, balanced lightly upon her feet, feeling hot and uncomfortable in her absurdly impractical Starfleet dress uniform. Beside her stood Deanna Troi, similarly attired but managing to exude a sense of cool serenity rather than the warmth and frustration Beverly felt she was prey to. Patricia Evans had no such problems; simply and elegantly clothed in a black, tailored suit, she served to make Dr Crusher feel even more idiotic in her regulation dress.

The transporter room was quiet, *almost too much so*, thought Beverly Crusher, betraying her straying thoughts by the almost cat-like jump she gave as Commander Riker burst through the transporter room doors, hurriedly fastening his dress uniform collar as he dashed in.

"Captain's orders." He grinned unashamedly. "I hope I haven't missed anything!"

"No, sir," said Chief O'Brien from the control console, "we are just about to beam now, Commander."

"Commander Riker." Patricia Evans spoke in a cool voice. "I had expected the Captain to accompany you."

"The Captain sends his apologies, Emissary Evans -" Riker's charm came on almost like a light - "but at the moment he is needed on the Bridge. I hope I will do in his place for now."

That famous Riker smile, renowned throughout the known galaxy, worked its magic once more, and Deanna tried to hide her slight smile behind her hand as she perceived definite signs of unstiffening from the Federation Emissary, and even the glimmer of indulgent

amusement in the Syrene face, at the First Officer's words.

"Preparing to beam now." O'Brien's voice cut clearly into the pause in conversation. "Transporter activated, sir."

The welcome party stood facing the transporter pad as six figures shimmered into shape within its field, accompanied by the familiar whine associated with transporter equipment. The first thing that struck Deanna was the sheer height of the women - they were all surely over two metres in height, and the added centimetres of the raised transporter pad made them look almost like giants

The Syrene were dressed in black from head to toe, but in layers of clothing rather than a simply tailored suit of clothes. Shawls were cast around them to protect against the notorious Omega XXI winds, and hoods covered their heads. The first one of the group to step off the transporter pad shook her hood from her hair as she stepped down towards the Enterprise reception party.

"Welcome to the USS Enterprise. I am Commander William T Riker, First Officer," said Riker warmly, stepping forward to greet his guests as the other Syrene saw fit to follow suit.

"Aglaopheme of Sterope; Ligia, Xepia, Pheme, Molpe and Thel - all also of the House of Sterope."

The first of the group spoke with authority, now easily recognisable as the woman whose transmission to the Enterprise earlier had caused a flurry of subspace communication between the Galaxy Class Starship and Starfleet. Her familiar viridescent eyes shrewdly studied the assembled group before her.

"Federation Emissary Patricia Evans, Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi and Chief Medical Officer Dr Beverly Crusher," Riker replied promptly, but Aglaopheme's attention had been lost after the first name had been uttered by the First Officer of the Enterprise.

"Parthenope!" she hissed sibilantly, tossing her head back haughtily. "Well, Parthenope of Caea, I cannot deny surprise."

"Do not call me that!" Evans bit out. "You will refer to me by my Terran Human name, Patricia Evans."

"So you choose to deny your House... Then as you wish, so be it."

The sight of the two women standing face to face finally convinced Commander Riker, if he needed any convincing, that there was no doubt as to Evans being Syrene. Both were of a similar build and physical demeanour, the only apparent difference being that Patricia Evans lacked the curious green eyes evident in Aglaopheme and all the accompanying Syrene. She also had a smooth raven dark bob haircut, whereas all six of the Syrene contingent had huge manes of hair settled into thick locks trailing down their long backs, making their already considerable height seem even greater.

Finally, after a few moments of taking stock of each other, Aglaopheme finally broke eye contact with Evans, giving her a final, insolent assessing look before turning to Commander Riker.

"We have cargo to come aboard. It is... tradition that an uninvited guest should bring such an offering to an Yrice," Aglaopheme explained, with great reluctance, "but no doubt your pet Syrene from the House of Gaea has already told you that and more!"

The strange Syrene woman's voice was contemptuous, prompting Riker and O'Brien to exchange glances of concern.

"I can run a check on the cargo whilst it is in transport, sir," O'Brien pointed out, "and delay materialization temporarily, if need be."

"Do it, Chief," said Riker simply.

"We hope you will find your stay here comfortable," Deanna said with a smile. But no sooner had she said the words than she closed her eyes in a lengthy blink as another empathic blip shot through her head, though thankfully on this occasion nowhere near as strong as the last. As if the lesser power of the emission allowed greater clarity, Troi was almost able to hear its composition, discerning it as a clamouring of voices, a massive chorus, gone before it was properly there but its effect still making her stagger.

"Troi?" A cool voice spoke to her, yet did not.

Deanna opened her eyes to see Aglaopheme looking straight at her, her lips unmoving but her words clear,

"Do not be alarmed. My father was Betazoid. So, they have a Federation empath also... Well, greetings anyway. Deanna Troi of Enterprise - and you may call me Agla."

Then Aglaopheme of Sterope put out her hand, obviously expecting Deanna Troi to shake it in the old Earth tradition, which she did with a startled look towards Beverly and Will's curious stares.

Once her hand was released, Counselor Troi moved closer to Beverly Crusher and inclined her head towards the Doctor. "I have just had a mild recurrence of the phenomena that caused my fainting fit," she said quietly to the CMO. "I think it may be worth discussion."

"OK, Sickbay - 20 minutes," Dr Crusher whispered out of the corner of her mouth

Meanwhile, Commander Riker was busy with his official reception duties. "Your quarters have been prepared," Riker informed the delegation. "If you will join the security detail awaiting you, they will escort you to your cabins."

"Excellent, Commander." Agla regarded the Commander in a haughty, assessing, almost masculine manner, but her glance was one of pure feminine appreciation as she said, "And do thank your Captain for being so kind as to send such an... efficient... officer to attend to our needs. Hopefully we shall enjoy your company again shortly, Commander Riker" And with that the Syrene filed out.

It was not so much what Agla said, thought Deanna, as she watched Will Riker assume a look more familiar upon Captain Picard's face - a look somewhere between shock and unease, but the way it was almost... well... purred out. She chanced a glance at Beverly Crusher to see the CMO's blue eyes twinkling mercilessly at the First Officer of the Enterprise. From behind the assembled trio, a hastily smothered laugh come cough reminded them of the presence of Chief O'Brien at the controls.

"Chief," Commander Riker rapped out.

"Sir," the Chief responded, his countenance poker straight, as if it had never been anything else.

"Bring that cargo up - but I want full analysis of its contents before even one atom of its pattern is put into place."

"Sir," the Chief responded again.

Deanna Troi, Beverly Crusher and William T Riker turned to watch the transporter as its high pitched shimmering whine once more filled the air, and a large crate approximately 1.5 metres square and high wavered into focus.

"Container, simple metal alloy, watertight, custom built for carriage, light but strong," Chief O'Brien reported clearly. "Contents, liquid. Composition, 50% H₂O water, 30% CH₃CH₂OH alcohol, 10% protein, probably in suspension, 6% vegetable extract, 2% vegetable matter comparable to cellulose, 1.5% anomalous biological molecules and finally 0.5% trace elements."

The crate finally materialized onto the transporter pad.

"It would appear to be some form of alcoholic beverage, Commander," Chief O'Brien observed.

"Great," Riker sighed. "Thirteen Syrene aboard the Enterprise, and now it looks like they intend throwing a party."

"Real alcohol," Dr Crusher pointed out, her face deadpan. "Not synthohol..."

"Could be very interesting," Deanna chimed in. "Are you going to tell Captain Picard?"

Will Riker gave them a warning look as he instructed the Chief to transport the crate and its contents to holodeck 3 immediately.

"If the computer scan shows a 'harmless' alcoholic beverage..."

"30% proof, Will!" protested Dr Crusher.

"And in all likelihood the Syrene will drink themselves stupid, and spend the rest of the journey to Starbase Lima sleeping it off... then I am not complaining, and neither, I hazard a guess, will the Captain."

"But imbibing strong alcohol can often cause aggressive, uncontrolled behaviour in many species," Deanna pointed out, her voice suddenly serious, "particularly when individuals are under stress."

"Will, I sensed from the Syrene on their arrival, as a whole, a spirit of reunion, of

excitement... almost celebration."

Will Riker regarded the Ship's Counselor steadily as she recounted her impressions.

"But this could be deceptive. Not only the occurrence of strange empathic anomalies I have experienced around these creatures concerns me, but also their emotional state. Agla telepathed to me just now; while she did so she allowed her guard to drop, and the emotions she revealed were most definitely NOT reunion, celebration and the like."

"What were they then, Counselor?"

"Fear, anxiety," Counselor Troi replied, "and at levels that I would normally associate with life or death situations. As a snapshot of the Syrene emotional state... I find it a matter for some concern."

Lucy sat upon the bed in her cabin, crouched low over a collection of circuitry on her lap, and most particularly a small box balanced somewhat precariously upon her knee. From her teeth dangled a couple of lengths of optic fibre which had been drawn previously from a slim bundle that lay on the bed in a long grey box.

In the main living area of their temporary quarters, the outer door swished open and Lucy, startled, looked up at her own shut cabin door, the incredibly delicate soldering gadget balanced in her fingers.

"Lucy?"

With a gasp, Lucy jumped as she looked down and realised she had left the tiny laser tool on and had now burnt a minuscule hole in the circuitry's black casing.

"Lucy - are you in there? Can I come in?"

Lucy coolly gathered all her equipment scattered over the covers into the long, grey container, and then pushed it all into a drawer beside the bed.

"This will not work, Lucy," came Patricia Evans' voice from the other side of the door. "It will not make me change my mind on the matter."

Her daughter did not answer, instead she lay upon the bed, stoically staring at the ceiling,

her mouth set in a mutinous line.

"Lucy... Leucosia," came the Emissary's voice once again, softer this time. "I wish you were old enough to understand."

And finally the footsteps moved away from the door, signifying that her mother had finally withdrawn, but Lucy's eyes were button bright, almost feverish, as she glanced towards the door.

The young Syrene twisted across the bed and pulled a small alarm from her bedside, and set the chronometer with swift, nimble fingers. She then lay back on the bed and with one final glance at the crystal display of time, she seemed to finally relax. Sinking back onto her pillows, she allowed her eyes to close as if in genuine sleep, her hand falling from where it lay at her side, to dangle protectively close to the drawer containing the boxed evidence of her genius.

The viewscreen on the Bridge displayed its usual haunting expanse of space, the stars blurred slightly as the Enterprise decreased her speed from warp 4 to warp 1, but had yet to drop into impulse - after all they did have an appointment to keep with a 207 year old dignitary, mused Picard as he sat in his command chair, position relaxed, his chin resting on his fingers.

"Captain, we are due to enter orbit around Tigris V in a few moments," the Ensign reported from the conn.

"Excellent," Picard muttered, stretching from his chair, "and almost on time."

The Captain walked to the front of the Bridge before turning to address his Security Chief at communications.

"Worf, are we within communication range of Tigris V yet?"

"Almost, sir"

"Then prepare to tell Tigris V we are about to arrive and are prepared to receive our guest."

"Yes, Captain," Worf responded.

"Keen to get on with things, Captain?" Commander Riker smiled quietly from his position beside Worf as the Captain paced back to

his chair.

"Indeed. Number One," Picard answered crisply, and then carried on, almost in an undertone, "Data has just submitted a study that reveals there may be some excellent examples of Trojan asteroids situated within the bounds of the Achos system."

"Ah," said Commander Riker, his smile widening. "Captive asteroids?"

"Planetary building blocks," Picard corrected him, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "A potential set of keys to the birth of the Achos system is always worth a look, Number One."

"Captain, Tigris V is hailing us," Worf signalled the Captain as Picard prepared to talk at some length to his First Officer on the subject of the forthcoming stellar study.

With a small sigh, Picard glanced at the sympathetic face of Riker and gave a wry smile. "On screen, Mr Worf," he said, "but no audio as yet. Let's see to whom we are about to speak."

The main viewscreen flickered to reveal a by now unmistakeable face of Syrene origin - although this individual seemed somewhat older than those others of the race they had seen thus far.

"Why do I suddenly get the feeling we are rapidly becoming outnumbered?" Picard confided to Riker as his First Officer came to stand beside him.

"Although the arithmetic says otherwise, sir, I do know what you mean!" agreed Riker emphatically

"Audio, Mr Worf," the Captain instructed the Klingon Bridge Officer

"This is the USS Enterprise, Captain Jean-Luc Picard commanding. We shall be arriving at Tigris V very shortly. How may we help in the meantime?" The Captain enunciated his words clearly in his precise tones.

"Greetings to you, Captain Picard. My name is Pisinoe of Achelous, aide to Thelixepia of Achelous." The Syrene had the slightest trace of a lisp that gave her a vulnerable air, totally in contrast to the scar high on her left cheekbone. "We wish to discuss the matter of embarkation prior to your arrival at Tigris V."

"Of course," replied Picard. "Please proceed."

"We understand it will be via transporter to the transporter room aboard your ship."

"Indeed," agreed Captain Picard. "That is quite correct."

"Unsuitable," lisped the Syrene aide. "That is not satisfactory. A shuttlecraft is preferable. We do not consider a transporter room to be... secure."

Commander Riker glanced at his Captain's face and discerned instantly what his Captain thought of such a request.

"That is not possible," Riker replied. "It would take too long to dispatch a shuttle to the surface of Tigris V. Plus that, if it is security that worries you, transportation is almost instantaneous whereas you would be vulnerable for a longer period of time in a weaponless shuttlecraft travelling from planet to Starship."

There was another pause.

"Agreed," came the response, "but we do still not consider a transporter room to be secure enough."

"Madame, this is a starship of the United Federation of Planets," Picard pointed out, his tone frosted with sarcasm, "and everyone aboard, with the exception of your own people, are Starfleet personnel and therefore, with all due respect, are hardly likely to be prime suspects for some form of machiavellian plot. I am responsible for these people, and I trust my crew implicitly."

"Captain." The response from the Syrene aide contained a measure of dry amusement. "Trust me. Everyone in the entire Universe is a potential assassin. One just has to find the right... price."

Impasse. Captain Picard signalled Worf to cut the audio and turned to look at Commander Riker who had turned his back on the screen to rub his nose with his forefinger.

"Suggestions, please." Picard turned to address his First Officer. "I would appreciate any ideas on a REASONABLE compromise to resolve this. Will?"

"We could transport them direct to

Thelxepia's quarters. A security team is already present and they would not be required to move along ship's corridors either, thus avoiding general exposure."

"They could also board in two parties, with your permission, Captain." Worf spoke from his position to the rear of the Bridge, "as they may prefer to dispatch a first group for reconnaissance, to assess security arrangements aboard the Enterprise."

"Which I am sure are more than adequate," pointed out Riker, with a glance at Worf, "as Mr Worf's extensive arrangements seem most thorough."

"Of that I am sure," Captain Picard agreed. "Make it so, Number One, subject to the aide's agreement. Thelxepia is an old woman; the transporter may well be traumatic enough for her, so the least we can do is make all this as painless as possible."

"But Captain - what if they insist on having the shuttlecraft?" Riker asked with a frown.

"Then they shall have it, Number One," Picard responded without hesitation, "and, as an honoured guest of Starfleet, should Thelxepia require that I personally pilot the shuttle - then of course we would have no choice but to accede to that request also."

"Then let us sincerely hope that they find our compromise acceptable, sir," Riker responded, unable to stop himself breaking into an irresistible smile.

"Let's," Picard agreed, "for ALL our sakes."

Dearna Troi leaned against the side of turbolift one doing her level best to stifle a most unofficer-like laugh at their honoured guest's pithy observations on Starfleet's flagship in general, its transporters in particular, and now its turbolifts in most particular.

Emissary Evans had been hailed some time earlier by Captain Picard, who had informed her of Thelxepia's imminent arrival, whilst extending an invitation to a tour of the bridge for both Emissary and Syrene Elder, the attentive and protective Syrene security contingent being a major factor in this. They did not want the Elder to go alone, the Captain did not want surplus

Syrene on the Bridge.

Thelxepia of Achelous was not what Deanna had expected when she was informed that she was to be one of the party to escort the Syrene Elder, and her aide/bodyguard Pisinoe, to the Bridge. She was surely the sprightliest 207-year-old that Deanna Troi had seen in her lifetime, not that she had seen many humanoids of such advanced years.

The ancient Syrene was unbowed by age, her eyes were as shrewd as they were bright, she had artistically grey streaked locks of hair that were some length, in what appeared to be true Syrene tradition, and was easily as tall as Evans. The UFP Emissary stood in conversation with the Syrene Elder and Pisinoe, as Deanna and Dr Crusher stood in attendance. The condition of the Syrene aide Pisinoe's releasing subsequent responsibility of Syrene security to the Enterprise had been that the Elder's life signs would be constantly monitored and logged by the main computer. Although it had been a reluctant decision, Evans' argument that there had to be a display of trust at some point had won the day - but only then because Thelxepia had agreed, and what Thelxepia of Achelous decided upon was put into effect immediately by the Syrene without further question. Deanna had noted with her customary acuteness.

"Doctor." The sharp toned voice sliced easily over the hum of the turbo lift. "Come round here where I can see you. No doubt you are waving one of those ridiculous remote sensors around my aura as if it was a demented gnat!"

"No, I am not, and I would certainly not do so without your permission," the CMO pointed out with a great show of injured dignity, her chin up.

"Then what are you doing here? Have you not got any sick people to fuss over, Doctor?" came the tart rejoinder.

"On the contrary, sickbay is as busy as ever, but the Captain felt that someone of your... disposition, might require a Doctor in attendance."

"Someone of my advanced years you mean. This Captain of yours would appear to be an interfering... Worried I'm going to drop dead on his Bridge, is he?"

"No, the Captain is simply concerned." Beverly Crusher started to explain patiently, but on perceiving Troi working hard to avoid catching her eye, a betraying twitch tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"Concerned... harumph!" Thelxepia snorted in disgust. "And I would never be so convenient as to drop dead in such a nice public place as the Bridge. His private quarters, now... that would cause something like a decent stir, would it not?"

"Of that, I am sure," Beverly Crusher agreed, her face an example of iron willed discipline, her features poker straight.

"Well, Chief Medical Officer - how do you think I am coping with all this excitement at the grand old age of 207 of your Earth years?"

"Honestly? I think you will probably outlive us all," Crusher responded drily, following that great tradition Enterprise Doctors had of speaking their minds.

There was something of a pause before Thelxepia of Achelous released a booming shout of laughter that obscured the swish of the opening turbolift doors and exploded onto the Bridge as they finally reached their destination.

The Bridge crew all looked towards the group as one, the Syrene Elder's vocal amusement attracting attention and then the sight of the Syrene Elder holding it.

Dr Crusher hung back to the rear of the party as Counselor Troi and Patricia Evans moved forward to make the introductions and observe the necessary protocol. It was impossible not to appreciate the humour in the moment as Picard met his 'failing' 207 year old guest for the first time. The Doctor seriously doubted whether anyone but Jean-Luc Picard's closest friends and colleagues would have noticed, due to how well he covered his shock with his own personal mixture of reserved charm and politeness.

"I think Thelxepia likes the Captain," came Troi's amused voice at her side as Beverly watched the Syrene leader shake Picard firmly by the hand and pat him heartily on the shoulder in the manly fashion so characteristic of the Syrene race as a whole. Picard's surprise at such a gesture was patent.

"I agree... although it would appear Jean-Luc has his own thoughts about being so

manhandled," Beverly responded, not without humour as she observed the Captain on the verge of being physically dwarfed by the height of the three Syrene around him. But it was not size of stature that made Jean-Luc Picard a commanding figure, but his presence, and with an urbane smile he introduced his second in command.

"I think Thelxepia likes Will Riker too," chuckled Dr Crusher, as Commander Riker was also subjected to Syrene pleasantries and was given that same visual study. "Or perhaps a little more!"

"Have you noticed how the Syrene almost visually dissect male Humans on introduction?" the Counselor asked in a low undertone. "No - that is not quite the right description..."

The Ship's Counselor appeared to be having problems finding suitable words to complete her observation, so Beverly attempted her best shot for her.

"Like an ancient horse dealer judging horseflesh?" Beverly glanced at Deanna's patently confused face, and said quickly, "Sorry, Counselor, an old Earth analogy... I meant assessing, almost as if they are about to make a purchase. I must admit, I am standing here half expecting Thelxepia to examine our Commanding Officers' teeth and limbs for general health."

"Yes, that is what I meant." Deanna smiled behind her hand as she finally comprehended the Doctor's words, watching the diplomatic party start their tour of the Bridge stations.

Suddenly, Thelxepia let out a distinctive shout that made both Dr Beverly Crusher and Deanna Troi simultaneously jerk round and look towards the UFP Emissary and the Syrene Elder.

"Are you all right Madame?" Picard asked Thelxepia, somewhat concerned at the Syrene Elder's involuntary shout of disbelief.

"Of course I am!" Thelxepia snapped tersely before striding with a surprising turn of speed over to the Ops position and Lt Commander Data, who was busy working with the control panel.

"Good God!" the Syrene Elder burst out unexpectedly, staring hard at Data.

Data looked up, and then looked at Captain Picard with an expression of some

confusion. While used to being something of a curiosity to visitors to the Bridge of the Enterprise, he had never yet elicited such a response from a visiting dignitary.

"Please don't be alarmed." Captain Picard visibly relaxed somewhat on discerning what the object of her agitation actually was, and was quick to reassure. "Commander Data is a unique Starfleet Officer, and a valued member of my Bridge crew. He will do you no harm."

"I am an android," Data supplied helpfully.

"Thank you both most kindly." Thelxepia let out another of her almost audible snorts of disgust as she continued to speak. "But I am quite aware of exactly what you are, Commander Data."

As she moved about the android Bridge Officer, who was still sitting at his position at Ops, Riker signalled one of the other members of the Enterprise Bridge crew to relieve Data from his post.

"You don't think she sees Data as a potential threat, do you Captain?" Riker asked Picard in an urgent undertone of concern.

"Lord knows. If only I knew, Number One," Picard responded. "The Syrene appear to be as unpredictable as they are mysterious."

Data moved slowly from his post, almost reluctantly for him, as he cast another glance of inquiry towards Captain Picard, who responded with an almost imperceptible nod towards his third in Command. Thelxepia circled him slowly, her hands on her hips, her attention focussed on the remarkable being before her. Meanwhile Data, used so often being at the centre of interest on such occasions, waited patiently for her to finish her perusal, with an expression of wary interest upon his face.

"You have no cause to be alarmed," he said, repeating the spirit of the Captain's words earlier, in his characteristically very gentle voice, "for I cannot harm you."

Thelxepia of Achelous merely smiled, and said, "I have a question for you Commander Data."

"I will endeavour to answer it adequately, Madam," Data replied without hesitation.

Thelxepia stood for a brief moment, one

considering, slender finger against her sculpted lips, before she removed it and asked, "Tell me, young man.... 400 quadrillion bits of memory or 800 quadrillion?"

The silence upon the Bridge of the Enterprise was almost deafening.

"800 quadrillion bits is my total memory capacity," Data answered promptly before his face started to register his version of surprise.

"So he managed it... That sly old dog! So that means 60 trillion operations per second linear computational, correct?"

"Er... correct." Data exchanged a bewildered look with Captain Picard and Commander Riker before returning his attention to the Syrene Elder before him.

"My, my, my. Quite beautiful. Quite, quite beautiful. The man was, of course, quite exceptionally gifted in so many ways..." Her tone briefly changed to one of mild criticism. "He had the attention span of an Ortlalian water mite, of course, if things didn't interest him, but if they did... genius!"

"Did ...did you know my creator?" Data asked candidly, clearly puzzled.

"Commander Data - a gentleman may always ask a lady if she knew a man, but cannot always expect the answer to be an honest one."

Data frowned as he attempted to discern exactly what her answer had been to his question, but on seeing his difficulty, Thelxepia smiled with such sweetness that Deanna felt the urge to blink with disbelief.

"Let us just say that I helped Soong, in a very minor capacity, on a ridiculously insignificant project, a long, long time ago."

Data regarded her with no little fascination upon hearing these words, and was about to ask her yet another question, when Thelxepia stopped him with the simple action of reaching out with one long, thin elegant hand to pat the android's pale cheek with tender gentleness.

"You know something," she said, so quietly that her words were almost lost against the background hum of the starship Enterprise. "I had forgotten how much I always liked that particular face."

THREE

Chief Medical Officer Dr Beverly Crusher. Medical Log supplemental:

The study of the Syrene delegates by Counselor Troi, Commander Data and myself proceeds so slowly that we appear to be only a few points off total stagnation. It would seem that potential millennia of silence are not about to be miraculously broken in just a few days. Therefore, I have resorted to studying, in far greater detail than is normal, the results of the boarding medicals of Patricia and Lucy Evans. This brief report at present forms the most detailed record of Syrene physiology in the Starfleet data banks to date...

Dr Beverly Crusher paused as a polite cough disturbed her reverie while she silently pondered what to put in the next line of her supplemental log. She looked up to see the Emissary hovering somewhat uncertainly at the entrance to her Office, which was positioned opposite the main door into sickbay.

"Dr Crusher?" The Emissary's normal poise seemed less pronounced as she addressed Beverly Crusher within her own domain. "Have you got a few moments?"

"Certainly." Beverly indicated that she should come in, and waved her to the chair on the opposite side of her desk. "How may I help you, Emissary?"

"It is Lucy, Doctor. I am... well." Patricia Evans' self-control was all that seemed to stop the woman collapsing in the chair. "I am very worried about her, Dr Crusher - she doesn't eat, all she seems to do is sleep and since we came on board the Enterprise, she has been -"

"Whoa, hang on a second!" Dr Crusher threw up one hand to halt the verbal flow. "Not so fast. I'm a Doctor, not a speed linguist. Now just slow down a bit and take it a little more easily!"

Dr Crusher moved from the chair positioned behind her rather large desk to perch in a more approachable fashion on its top beside the Syrene Emissary.

"I am sorry, Dr Crusher." To Beverly's surprise, she realised that the woman appeared to

be on the edge of tears. "I find such things very difficult to discuss... in public most particularly."

"This is my office, Mrs Evans, we can be quite private here; no one will disturb us. Now exactly what is this about Lucy?"

"She has been sleeping a lot... Well, almost continuously since we came on board the Enterprise. She has refused to come out of her room to either drink or eat whilst I have been present, since our... disagreement."

"Ah, yes... the one that Counselor Troi overheard?" Dr Beverly Crusher observed with a small professional smile. "Well, she checked out fine physically at the medical I gave her upon embarkation from your home world. Nothing wrong at all, so unless there is something more specific, maybe other symptoms... fever, sickness maybe?"

"No, none that I know of. She has just hidden herself away since we came on board," the Emissary answered quietly.

"I see. Mrs Evans, did Lucy WANT to come on this trip, or did you make her come?"

"Well, it was a bit of both, Doctor," Patricia Evans confessed awkwardly. "In fact, part of the reason I accepted this assignment was that it was an ideal, and timely, opportunity to remove Lucy from some rather... bad company she had become involved with on our home world. It was not a popular decision with Lucy, but it was the only way - she should have known better than to associate with the like... but then that is, as they say, in the past now."

"For Lucy, maybe not. Which means this could simply be a case of teenage rebellion," Dr Crusher stated cautiously, "should Syrene adolescents be anything like their Human counterparts."

There was the briefest of pauses. "Ah, so you know. Do not worry, Dr Crusher, I am in no way upset. Quite the contrary." Evans smiled slowly. "You did subject us to a very thorough medical examination upon embarkation - I would have thought you a very poor doctor indeed if you had missed such a monumentally obvious fact as our being a completely different race!"

"But I would have thought that that very fact would have made you avoid that medical at all costs," stated Dr Crusher, puzzled, "as about the only thing I have divined about the Syrene

race for the assimilation study so far is that they are incredibly secretive."

Patricia Evans threw her a sideways assessing look as she said, "Ah, but I never actually TOLD you of my origins. You found it out all by yourself - therefore I have not actually broken any Syrene rules."

"Rules? What kind of rules?" Crusher frowned.

"Oh, I think maybe you are bright enough to work that out by yourself, Dr Crusher."

Beverly Crusher regarded the rather austere figure before her, and realized she might just have found herself a very real ally in this rather complex game they all appeared to be engaged in at present.

"Please, Mrs Evans, feel free to call me Beverly."

"Then you must call me Patricia," the Emissary replied graciously.

"On the subject of Lucy, Patricia, it may be as well if I ask the Counselor to drop in on your daughter when she has a moment, because it may well have more to do with adolescent blues - or even stress - than physical illness."

"Stress?" You think that is possible - ?"

"Of course. To be, one moment, a relatively normal person within a society you have been part of all your life, then, the next, aboard a starship and regarded with some element of suspicion by all those surrounding you, can be most stressful." Dr Crusher paused momentarily before continuing. "And speaking of stress-related ailments, how are you bearing up? It cannot be easy worrying about your daughter whilst juggling the group dynamics of a very... *individual* collection of people."

"No, it is not easy," Patricia admitted, her eyes downcast, "but I WILL manage, for there is far too much at stake for me to even consider failure!"

The tone of the Syrene woman's voice and the angle of her shoulders made it appear as if all the troubles in the Universe had been heaped onto this Syrene's narrow shoulders.

"What exactly is at stake, Patricia?" Beverly asked quietly.

"I cannot answer that question," Patricia replied in an apologetic tone. "I am sorry. We have very strict taboos about what we can discuss with 'outsiders', and what we cannot..." She paused. "That is not to say, of course, that if you were to ask me even very personal questions, they would ALL be subject to the taboos."

Dr Crusher promptly stood from her perch on the desk, and asked, "Why are your eyes blue when all the other Syrene, including Lucy, have a distinct green coloration... and tell me if this is too personal," she amended quickly.

"No, not at all. But therein lies a sad tale which does not really bear repeating in any great detail. Tell me, have you ever heard of a man called Mandale?"

"Mandale... Not Vidor Mandale? Of course I have... Eminent geneticist of the late 23rd century; his papers are required reading at Medical school and beyond," Dr Crusher answered.

"Vidor Mandale - Professor Mandale - was my father."

"Vidor Mandale was your... But that would make you..."

"Perhaps a little older than you thought?"

"But nothing I have ever read reflected Mandale's marital status."

"My mother died when I was very young. In fact, I cannot even remember her clearly. All I do know is that they met under a rather unusual set of circumstances due to my father's work. These so-called circumstances were never explained fully, but suffice to say my whole family lived a very reclusive existence."

"Did your father know who... *what* you were?" Beverly Crusher asked, her voice barely above a sympathetic whisper as she added, "It sounds a really stupid question!"

But it was almost as if the Emissary had ceased to hear her.

"Oh yes. He knew. Hence, Dr Crusher, my eyes. Upon my mother's death, he took it upon himself to replace my original Syrene ones with cloned genetic implants of his own."

"I noticed that there were some curious anomalies in the medical," Dr Crusher said, "but I

put it down to the fact that I know so little about Syrene physiology. Why on earth would someone do such a thing if the originals were not dysfunctional?"

"It was the act of a loving father, Doctor, if a slightly misguided one. And it worked. With my mother gone, no one was the wiser as to my heritage, myself included. I was the model daughter to my ageing genius of a father, studious, hard working, the perfect Starfleet cadet, in fact."

"Yes. Jean-Luc mentioned you had attended Starfleet Academy. He also mentioned something about an incident with a shuttle..."

"He did? Not much though, I would wager... and it is not for me to tell any more than he probably has. I will say this though, Captain Jean-Luc Picard is very, very different from the rather quick tempered, rash young man I knew."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. But he still has that... distance. Then again, we were never great friends, and I think he remembers me as I was then - and I was rather wild!"

"What happened to the hard working, studious, Starfleet cadet?"

"She had been tracked down by Thelxepia of Achelous and told she was in fact a Syrene, descended from what was thought to be the lost House of Gaea. When I heard I was in fact not really just Patricia Mandale, but Parthenope of Gaea, I guess I flipped out for a while. It was a... shock. I had never been told who or what I was... Do you know I even had a tutor when I was little, who told me if I didn't eat my supplements, the Syrene witches would come and use my hair for their nets! My whole life was based on a tissue of half truths and deception; my 'incurable' headaches were the result of periodic telepathic battering - and should I live to the same age as Thelxepia of Achelous, these - " she indicated her striking blue/grey eyes - "will have to have been replaced at least three times by cloned implants."

"The empathic shock that Counselor Troi felt, and the blips that she keeps experiencing. They are quite normal then, aren't they?" Dr Crusher realized "In fact, I bet it forms quite an effective tracking system, if one knows how to use it of course. Well I never!"

"You are quick, Dr Crusher," said Evans,

with a note of admiration in her voice, "and correct. Simple but effective. Thelxepia found me when I was about to enter my second year at Starfleet Academy. Her timing for that particular revelation was not good."

"What happened afterwards?"

"My father had died. I had just met Jess - I hated the arrogant son of a bitch on first sight. I fell in love, and I left Starfleet."

"A happy ending, then?"

"No, not quite. It was not until the birth of Lucy that Jess realised exactly what he had been living with all those years."

"You didn't tell him?" Beverly asked, appalled. "I take he did not react well."

"No, he did not. It was all so painful, and I had just come to terms with what I felt was my father's betrayal. I felt I was not Human, not Syrene... I, I had nowhere, except with Jess. Jess's reaction was to move us to a Vulcan colony. He felt the Vulcan philosophy of IDIC would mean Lucy would be safer, happier, less victimised than if she had been raised amongst Humans or some less tolerant races. It seemed a good solution to the problem of being of Syrene descent and I most certainly did not want to put her through what I endured with these." Evans indicated her own eyes.

"And Jess Evans came to terms with your heritage just like that?" Crusher queried.

"No. He did his best, but it was not until the final stages of the Darnay's disease that I realised how betrayed I had made him feel. But he still wanted a son, to carry on the family name in that quaint Earth tradition, and I eventually managed to give him the son he wanted so badly. But the disease was, by then, getting a good hold on him and he was but an evil shadow of the man he had once been."

"But you still loved him," Beverly observed with some understanding.

"I did. The Syrene longevity means one will undoubtedly mourn more than one husband, but Jess was... is special; and the more he tried to hurt me, the harder I tried to please him. Lucy despised me for it, quite openly too. She saw it as weakness that I did not retaliate - even when he told a Starfleet colleague of my Syrene heritage in an effort to humiliate me when I dared argue

with him on one occasion."

"Is this the same colleague who asked you to act on this mission as UFP representative?"

"It was. It also seemed an ideal opportunity for Lucy to see the Syrene as they really are, with their petty bickering and silly rules, and not as the dashing figures of romance she has built them up into."

"It's a big job, Patricia," Beverly cautioned her. "Are you sure you are up to it?"

Patricia suddenly looked down at her hands. They were trembling in an almost convulsive fashion.

"No, not at all. And I must apologise, Doctor. I...have said far too much - I do not make a habit of going on so, I can assure you. It is my Human upbringing that makes me talk..."

"Patricia, do not apologise, please." Beverly crouched down beside the Emissary. "I want to learn, to know all I can about your race. But I can only do it if you let that Human upbringing of yours take control more often. Talk to me, share things with me, like you are now... You must trust us. Not only me, but Deanna and Data too."

"It is... hard," she managed, endeavouring to regain some of her iron composure. "It is not our way, you see."

"I have worked that one out," replied the Doctor drily. "Now, are you up to one more question?"

"Maybe just one more."

"You mentioned a son George. Is he Syrene also?"

"George? No! He is male... therefore George is Human."

"Human? You mean that there are NO Syrene males at all?"

"No, not one. It is genetically impossible, Dr Crusher. Usually Syrene - it is actually wrong saying 'Syrene females' as there is only one gender - bear children in a ratio of 7:1, seven male children to one female child, which manifests itself as..."

"Seven males of the father's race to one female pure Syrenusae race." Dr Crusher finished on an excited note. "Isn't that exciting?"

"So you are telling us, Beverly, that a Syrenian mother, and there are only ever mothers, will bear one Syrenian daughter for every seven sons! I have never heard the like within humanoid races before."

"It is intriguing," Data agreed, "and that would explain why the Syrene race is so thinly scattered throughout the charted universe."

"In a way, it is almost tragic," Dr Crusher continued, sobering slightly, "for it is a physiological pattern that is almost guaranteed to isolate. That is, if it were not for these 'blips', acting almost like beacons."

"Indeed." Counselor Troi rested her chin on her hand, her elbow upon the Conference table. "That is the part I find most interesting, and I have been having a good think about it since our chat earlier, Beverly."

Beverly Crusher had in fact immediately hailed the Counselor after her long talk with Patricia Evans, eager to share the small discoveries she had just made about the Syrenusae with her friend and colleague - hence the hastily called meeting.

"I have a theory that the intensity of these 'transmissions' must be linked some way to emotional well-being, as well as to age. There are now thirteen Syrene aboard; if they were all emitting 'blips' of the intensity I experienced outside Emissary Evans quarters, I would have been continuously out cold since they arrived. In addition, the one I experienced in the Transporter Room upon the arrival of Agla's party, was cooler, more distant... Controlled, almost." Deanna sat up straight in her chair to look at her two other colleagues.

"I think that the intensity may well be a product of youth, and of strong, basic, negative emotions such as fear, anger and the like. That would also explain why it took them so long to find Patricia. The headaches indicate she was obviously capable of receiving these transmissions and by the same token would imply she could emit her own. However, since the Syrene would not have been going solely on physical appearance, and up until the death of her father Patricia Evans' life was almost idyllic by Syrene standards, she must have been silent. Why should she be anything else - no one knew

her to be Syrene!"

"How much is known about Syrenusae origins Data?" Dr Crusher asked their android colleague who had been listening with interest.

"Unfortunately, not a lot. Their origins are as mysterious as the race itself, which is commonly accepted to be an itinerant race, predominantly female, that wander the known galaxies, some as assassins, some as mercenaries - even some less obvious Syrene are known to hold positions of considerable power. I have also consulted ancient Earth literature as suggested by the Captain, and have found some interesting coincidences as to the Syrene system of names and what they refer to as their 'house'."

"Could it just be that, Data, coincidence?" Troi asked.

"Possible. The ancient Earth mythologies describe 'Sirenes' as sea nymphs who would lure unfortunate ancient Earth mariners to their death. Most interesting is that they are called daughters of Phorcus, of Achelous and Sterope, of Terpsichore, of Melpomene, of Calliope, or of Gaea."

"Some coincidence," observed Troi, "and a natural conclusion from that is that it could indicate that there are more groups of Syrene out there than are represented at the assimilation."

"Indeed. So what came first, mythology or Syrene race?" Crusher asked.

"If only we knew," Deanna answered her. "We know so little about the race itself. It could be as old as space, or have been created by genetic science mere centuries ago."

"The nature of reproduction does show evidence that the Syrene race characteristic is an incredibly recessive gene, linked to the male/female XY chromosomes," Dr Crusher stated. "When the genotype is XY, male, the Syrene contributed X chromosome would appear to be able to mimic that of the genetic structure composing the Y chromosome."

Dr Crusher scratched her head and sighed heavily. "Of course that is based on Human genetics. In other races I dare not even guess what goes on, but Patricia Evans seems to have an excellent understanding of Syrene physiology, curiously enough, so if I can maybe persuade her to share some of that knowledge with us... who knows?"

"So, in simple terms, the Syrene race characteristic is triggered in Humans by something recognising the other piece of genetic input as non-male," Counselor Troi clarified. "That is a little creepy."

"But fascinating," Data observed. "The question is, is this a product of natural evolution, or has, at some time in the past, the Syrene genetic make up been tampered with?"

"A race of male child bearers... but why?" Beverly Crusher responded, puzzled. "The concept is somewhat archaic."

Data considered giving a shrug - his programming told him it was appropriate in this situation - but he did not want it to appear as an affectation. "There are still cultures who measure strength by the number of males able to undertake military duty. A ratio of 7 males to 1 female would be an acceptable ratio to such cultures, and such a ratio does not favour the Syrene themselves."

"But then what of their longevity, and why the strange intermittent telepathic ability?" Beverly Crusher sighed with frustration.

"We obviously still have much to accomplish prior to the start of the Yrice. But can I caution you both to keep quiet about this until Patricia can convince Thelexia and the other Syrene that being more open about their race would be of benefit to them."

The three officers stood up to leave the conference table, and Data fell into step beside Counselor Troi as they walked towards the Conference room door. "Counselor, I fail to understand what such a race would gain from being so secretive. For them to be so strangely obsessed with hiding all facts about their race and culture, is somewhat... confusing."

"Data, many races seek to survive by a diverse variety of methods - Klingon aggressiveness, the Human tendency to spread and colonise... The Syrene simply seek to preserve their own race via secrecy," Troi replied.

"But it does beg the question 'why now?'" Dr Crusher puzzled. "Why break all this age of silence now?"

"No doubt we will never know." Deanna smiled. "The Syrene do seem to be the masters of discretion. Or should I say mistresses?"

Guinan stood at her bar in Ten Forward, polishing glasses to place upside down as she watched Agla and Evans deep in conversation at one of the tables towards the rear of the relaxation facility.

With her sat Data, perched on a bar stool but with his back to the mysterious hostess of Ten Forward, watching the two Syrene women with such fixed attention that it bordering on a stare.

"Data."

No response.

"Data!"

Guinan's voice was soft, but the android still appeared to jump. "Yes Guinan?" he responded pleasantly.

"Data, you do realise you are staring."

"Am I?" He considered this for some moments before adding, "Yes, I am. It is just that Aglaopheme of Sterope and Emissary Evans are having a fascinating set of conversations."

Guinan had no wish to be hard on the innocent Data for simply emulating what it seemed every other crew member in Ten Forward seemed to be doing. For although the Enterprise Crew was well used to entertaining all manner of strange and unusual life forms, a race that was so mistrusted within the Federation itself bore some watching. Which they did - *cautiously, surreptitiously and not quite as obviously as Data*, Guinan observed wryly. In an effort to distract him again, for his attention had once more returned to the two women at the table in the corner, she asked, "Data, what did you mean by 'set' of conversations?"

Data twisted back to face her on his bar stool, his expression indicative of someone about to divulge a fascinating and little known fact. Guinan resisted the urge to smile, and simply put down her polishing cloth.

"As part of a previous assignment in the Ramatis star system, I taught myself to 'sign' - to use the skill of 'sign language' to allow myself to be understood by a Federation mediator after an accident left him unable to communicate with us."

"Oh, yes, I remember." Guinan nodded. "Riva and his chorus."

"That is correct. While I was watching the two Syrene delegates conversing just now, I started to recognise some of the apparently meaningless hand movements as actually representing coherent communication."

"Really, Data?" Guinan's face told him nothing of her reaction to his revelation, but he was beginning to know enough of other beings to recognise sarcasm, as long as it was not too subtle. "You don't say... It must be hard to keep any secrets round you Commander."

"Apparently so," he replied with a dead pan face, "but what does puzzle me is the contradiction between the two forms of communication. The words spoken via their hands are quite different to those being vocalized, and by the former, it would seem that the Syrene are far more divided over certain issues being addressed by the assimilation than we had first anticipated."

"Data," said Guinan. "Give those women some privacy. They must be fed up of being under the microscope 24 hours a day. And if they WERE in perfect agreement, there would not be much point in them being here!"

"Was I being intrusive, Guinan? Should I go over and apologise?"

"No. Data. No!" Guinan caught the android's arm as he was about to get up from the stool. "Just stay here and look at me, and make some nice polite conversation."

Instantly Data's face went blank, and then he looked at Guinan with an almost comical expression of urbane sophistication as he said, "You are looking quite lovely tonight, Guinan."

"Data!" she barked at him, trying hard not to laugh.

The only other reasonable topic of conversation was the weather, but that seemed somehow... inappropriate."

"Light years into deep space? You've at least got that right, Data."

Guinan raised her non-existent eyebrows in agreement, before sighing and finally capitulating to the original topic of conversation.

"So what does Counselor Troi think of the Syrene goings on?"

"Counselor Troi seems to think there is more to this than a simple assimilation study. And I must agree, their behaviour patterns have more in common with crisis talks than an academic project."

Guinan regarded Data in silence for some moments before she finally said in her mild way, "Well, at least they are talking, Data, and they are here. That alone must count for something."

Sickbay was, as ever, a hive of activity as Aglaopheme of Sterope swirled through its doors to pause somewhat arrogantly by CMO Doctor Crusher's office, which at present was empty.

"Hello, there," said Nurse Alicia Ogawa, not recognising the visitor as one of the normal crew contingent. "How may I help you?"

"I have been told that I am to see Dr Crusher."

"Have you just come on board?"

"Yes."

"Are you here for a routine embarkation bioscan?" the nurse asked her.

Agla shrugged and nodded, and looked towards Nurse Ogawa with some surprise, as she steered her towards an examination couch with some firmness.

"In that case, the Doctor will be here in a moment for your prelim medical bioscan. We are expecting quite a few people today, so if I could just take your name and details and just start to make an initial..."

Alicia Ogawa reached for her med scan equipment and flicked it on without thinking twice about it. It was, after all, one of her most routine medical duties. Aglaopheme of Sterope, however, was NOT a routine patient.

"No!"

A nerve numbing blow to the small nurse's fragile forearm knocked the medical scanner clean out of Nurse Ogawa's grasp and across sickbay.

"Do not dare approach me with such things," Agla spat with great venom. "It is taboo!"

"I'm sorry, but it is also Starfleet Regulations," the Nurse insisted bravely, nursing her arm as it started to show the ill effects of the blow already. "I have my orders. All beings granted permission of passage to a Starbase facility aboard Starfleet registered vessels are required to have some form of medical upon boarding unless granted special dispensation by Starfleet Command."

"And I say no," Agla replied with icy composure.

Nurse Alicia stooped slowly to pick the med scanner up from where the Syrene blow had dashed it to the floor, not for one moment taking her eyes from where the Syrene sat crouched on the edge of the examination couch.

"Come near me with that thing, Human, and I will not hesitate to -" Aglaopheme of Sterope started to threaten.

"Not hesitate to what?" came a glassy response.

Dr Crusher moved into sickbay and relieved Alicia of the med scan. "Thank you, Alicia, and my apologies. I should have warned you about our highly strung guests. I will take over from here." Crusher tapped her communicator. "Dr Selaar, would you attend to Nurse Ogawa's arm while I continue the medical arranged for Aglaopheme of Sterope."

"Of course, Dr Crusher," came Selaar's distinctly ironic Vulcan tones over the communicator.

"If you attempt to come anywhere near me with any form of medical equipment, Crusher, I will not hesitate to break it and you across your precious sickbay."

"On coming aboard the Enterprise as our guests, Emissary Evans and Thelexpia of Achelous agreed to abide by certain guidelines and rules. By joining the delegation as you have, you have also implicitly agreed to abide by our requirements of passage for travel aboard a Starfleet vessel. And, as so correctly pointed out by Nurse Ogawa, one of those requirements is a complete - and thorough - medical." Crusher's voice carried the timbre of cold steel as she equably spelled out how it was to the Syrene woman before her.

"I will not be subjected to this, Crusher."

"My full title is Chief Medical Officer, but you may call me DOCTOR Crusher, Madam," Beverly returned frostily, her face hard. "And I am not about to allow you to cause a major disturbance in my sickbay."

"You cannot subject me to this, DOCTOR Crusher," Aglaopheme hissed sibilantly, uncoiling herself to stand on her feet by the side of the examination bed, "for I will not allow it."

"If I have to call security, I will," Beverly Crusher insisted stoically, refusing to back down.

"I will break every one of those surgeon's fingers of yours before you even have a chance to hit your communicator," Agla threatened, and meant it.

Beverly clearly heard Nurse Ogawa gasp in horror within the silence now resounding through sickbay, and somewhat nervously licked her lips as she debated her options. She refused to back down from this woman after what she had subjected one of her medical staff to, and in the end, it was her Starfleet discipline that won out.

"Security!" Beverly Crusher rapped out, hitting her comm badge as she threw herself out of the path of the lunging Syrene. "Security to Sickbay, now!"

"Big mistake, Dr Crusher. Do you really think that their puny Human strength will be any match for mine?" Agla ground out as she advanced purposefully on the Chief Medical Officer.

"I have no idea, but then I should imagine it's a bit different when you are up against someone nearer your own size," Beverly hissed back, stepping cautiously across sickbay whilst facing her adversary, her hands loose as she stooped slightly in the standard Starfleet ready position for self defence.

"I am about to take great pleasure in breaking not only the medical scanner, but your very elegant nose before the Security team arrive, Dr Crusher," Agla promised chillingly.

"I think not."

The voice from the entrance to sickbay was enough to make everyone freeze.

"Ladies - I think that is enough excitement for one day, don't you?" came the dry tones of

Captain Jean-Luc Picard as he and Commander Riker strode into the tray. "And I would thank you NOT to threaten Starfleet medical equipment, Aglaopheme, and within that category I include scanner and the CMO's nose. Both, I feel, are equally vital to the crew aboard my vessel."

Aglaopheme of Sterope straightened up, as did Dr Crusher also, but the two still regarded each other with suspicion, neither prepared to fully drop their guard.

"Now I am sure that if you would like to come with me Madame, I could explain to your satisfaction the requirements incumbent upon coming aboard a vessel such as ours."

The Captain had moved gracefully into the thick of the situation, diffusing the fractious Agla by using his rare charm to remove the Syrene woman from sickbay.

"I am sure that Aglaopheme of Sterope will be back for her medical scan the instant I have explained it to her how important it is, and why we need it."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Beverly murmured in an almost voiceless undertone.

"Doctor, I will see you later."

The combination of steely glance and Captain Picard's tone did not bode well for his Chief Medical Officer as he whisked the Syrene from the medical facility, Commander Riker moving to one side to allow his Captain to pass by unimpeded.

"Until later, Doctor," Aglaopheme purred triumphantly at Crusher as she swirled out of sickbay.

Beverly Crusher watched them go, her face studiously neutral. "Just great. Just... great," she sighed.

"Are you OK, Beverly?" Will Riker asked, his voice concerned.

"Thanks Will, I'm fine. Did you intercept my call to Security?"

"Heck, no. You could hear what was going on right the way down to turboshaft 5 - we were actually en route to a meeting of the scientific research team responsible for the work to be done once the Syrene delegation

disembark.

"Oh dear... So instead of getting to talk about the Achos project, Jean-Luc gets to talk to a short tempered, aggressive prima donna of a -" Beverly was suddenly aware that all eyes in sickbay were upon her. "Oh never mind. Come on, stations, everyone. Let's get this medical facility cleared up and everything back to normal right this minute. Please!"

The long corridor was dim, deserted save for one figure. The Enterprise ran on a 24 hour clock, like any facility keyed towards the human race, and naturally enough those hours designated 'night hours' would find the large majority of the crew asleep in their cabins. Therefore it was an excellent time to make a move, to not be caught. For, although there was of course essential ship's staff still about their duties, with the right kind of guile and cunning one could avoid them.

The lone figure leaned against the corridor wall, hard to discern as separate from the ship's construction itself, due to the subdued lighting during the night shift. A slim hand against the dark wall panel brought a flickering response from the Enterprise Computer, more so after the question.

"How many personnel are there in corridor 35A at present?"

"One"

A simple answer to a simple, and apparently innocent question.

Obligingly, a map was displayed, indicating the figure's present position within corridor 35A. With that, the inquirer withdrew a small silver cube from a hidden pocket within voluminous folds of clothing, and it was placed against the dark panel, where it stayed of its own accord. The computer display within the locality of the cube instantly died away as if neutralized.

"How many personnel are there in corridor 35A at present?"

"One"

With that the figure crouched down and eased off a small access panel beneath the position of the silver cuboid, and started to withdraw individually selected isolinear chips.

"How many personnel are there in Corridor 35A at present?"

An isolinear chip was replaced, one that had just been subjected to treatment from a small optical device produced from yet another pocket.

"None."

The computer generated map display disappeared.

"Excellent!"

And, audaciously, the figure hummed a small tune as she worked, treating each one of as many as 40 isolinear chips taken from directly within the open access panel.

On the Bridge, Worf stood on duty, monitoring - amongst other things - ship's computer systems. Abruptly an alarm started, and then halted; then restarted, and then stopped again. Worf regarded the Bridge equipment with dour suspicion at this most unusual behaviour.

"Commander," he hailed Commander Riker.

What is it, Worf?"

"An erroneous signal - *apparently* an erroneous signal, sir. I am not sure."

"Have you initiated a diagnostic scan, Mr Worf?" Riker asked.

"Starting a diagnostic scan now, sir," Worf reported.

Riker nodded his approval before moving down to the main Bridge area.

"Ensign Davies - anything to report that could be linked to Mr Worf's signal?"

"A possible, sir." Ensign Davies' fingers danced across the Ops panel before him before he reported, "There very briefly appeared to be some form of problem in location access point 35A."

"Mr Worf, your opinion?"

"Diagnostic scan *has* finished clean, Commander. It could possibly be some form of glitch - but if we can identify a source, I would prefer to investigate."

"Of course," agreed the First Officer, nodding in agreement with the Klingon Security Chief.

"What was the nature of the problem you identified, Ensign?" Riker asked Davies.

"The area did not actively check as on line for approximately 15 seconds, but was not being flagged by the system as being in error in any way."

"And now?"

"Now all systems fully functional, on line and all readings are within required parameters."

"Hmmm." Riker mused thoughtfully, before striking his communicator with one finger.

"Riker to Data. Mr Data, are you busy?"

"Nothing that cannot wait, Commander," replied Data, his voice as lively as ever despite the lateness of the hour.

"Good. Data, I think we have something that may require your expertise..."

Lucy stood knocking upon the door to Aglaopheme of Sterope's quarters, but she still got no response.

"Agla... Agla, please answer. It is Leucosia."

There was still no answer. Lucy glowered fiercely at the Security Officer who was patrolling the corridor upon which the temporary Syrene guest quarters had been situated.

"Nobody has left this deck since I've been on duty," he informed the young Syrene helpfully.

"And how long is that?"

"Three hours," he replied before returning to his patrol duties.

"Agla, please open the door. I have something to tell you. Something really important."

There was still no answer. *Where can Agla be?* Lucy asked herself furiously, finally resorting to banging the door with her fists in frustration.

"Agla!"

The security detail had by this time paced speedily back, with his colleague. "Now, none of that. If you persist in causing a disturbance I will be forced to escort you back to the Emissary's quarters."

"All right. All right!" Lucy snapped at the security officer, plunging her hands deep into the voluminous pockets of her traditional black gown. "I am going. See - here I go, round the corner, back to my cabin like a good little girl," she crowed sarcastically, seeing the security guards exchange annoyed looks. "I have gone now!"

Once out of sight, she sighed, and then finally shrugged, an evil light in her eyes. "No Captain ever sailed his black ship past this point without listening to the honey-sweet tones that flow from our lips," she murmured cryptically, a grim smile spreading across her features as she crooned on. "And no one who has listened, has not gone on his way a wiser man."

FOUR

Aglaopheme of Sterope glided into sick bay and straight into Chief Medical Officer Dr Beverly Crusher's office as the Doctor was organizing the morning schedules with one of her nursing staff.

"I have returned, Doctor Crusher." Agia regarded Beverly Crusher with derision, her tone supercilious.

"So I can see," Dr Crusher replied, her sarcasm as dry as bones, "and, of course, let's not stand on ceremony. Just come right on in."

But her tone was totally lost on the Syrene woman, who gave her a disparaging smile. "As you wish Dr Crusher." And then she simply pulled up the most comfortable chair in the office, which just happened to be the CMO's, and sat down.

The male nurse standing next to Dr Crusher could not fail to notice how white the CMO's knuckles were as they gripped the clipboard she had been consulting.

"Do you need any help, Dr Crusher?" Implicit in his offer was an understanding that if she requested the woman's removal, he would

willingly undertake the task, but Beverly shook her head and waved him from the office.

"Thank you, Chris. We'll sort out the rest of the schedules later on." Beverly smiled, her near legendary poise and collection neatly in place. "I would ask you to take a seat, if you had not done so already," she said to Agla, refusing to take any one of the other chairs in the office, electing instead to perch on the edge of her desk.

"Have I annoyed you, Dr Crusher?" Her voice told Beverly that she hoped she had, but the CMO was not about to be caught out twice by this woman in so many days.

"No, not at all," Beverly lied with assurance, her voice silky smooth. "On the contrary, I am very pleased to see you have come back for your medical, and will, no doubt, be eager to apologise to Nurse Ogawa for hurting her arm yesterday."

Aglaopheme of Sterope crossed her legs and lounged back in the CMO's large chair, her facial expression almost like that of an elegant cat about to toy with an insignificant piece of prey.

"Oh no. I have not come to apologise Doctor." She used Beverly's title with so much scorn that it was tantamount to an insult. "I am back because I was asked to return by your very... very... charming Captain."

Beverly realised that she had never quite realized how many syllables the word 'charming' could be attributed with, when drawled in quite that way.

"Well I am rather disappointed by that, I had rather hoped..." started Beverly Crusher, crossing her arms in an unconsciously defensive posture across her chest, and then realising she was doing just that, uncrossed them.

"Oh, you are disappointed? Break my heart!" The woman's laugh was like fingernails scratching on slate, and about half as pleasant. "What a tragedy."

Beverly regarded the woman before her with dislike, using her personal discipline to control the natural tendency of her temper, as denoted by her red hair, to tell this irritating woman to go to hell. Or words to that effect.

"What would a woman like you know of tragedy or disappointment Dr Beverly Crusher? ...Then, again, it must be difficult to be on duty 24

hours a day. All this rote and discipline, all these people around you who do not even see a person but just a blue uniform with three pips on the collar and nothing more. Tragic - perhaps you do know something of real disappointment after all. My mistake, Dr Crusher."

The Syrene woman lounged back further in the chair and swung it artfully side to side in a calculating fashion.

"Your Captain is a very fascinating man. Not as much fun as Commander Riker, maybe, but there is something so much more attractive in a challenge, do you not think so, Beverly?"

Dr Beverly Crusher stood up, her movements jerky. This conversation had just about gone far enough. "Now, to your medical..."

"No, I do not wish to discuss things that are taboo," Agla snapped in an offhand manner.

"No, you want to discuss things that are personal instead," Beverly snapped back. "Well if you want to discuss Jean-Luc Picard, go and have a word with Patricia Evans; as a fellow Syrene and Federation representative, I am sure she will tell you everything you need to know."

"I will not talk to such as she, and do not foul the name of our race by linking it with one such as she. She is not Syrene - she was brought up as a weak Human. She amounts to nothing. The House of Gaea is dead!"

"And what of Lucy?" Crusher spat back, appalled. "If you consider the House of Gaea dead, what does that make Lucy? Human? My God, she is nothing more than a child -"

"It is our way, and trust me, it is... kinder this way. Your life is too soft, too easy for you to understand -"

"Easy! My life easy?" Beverly curled her hand into a tight fist, and hit the corner of her desk twice as if to emphasize her quietly spoken words, the volume of which were at direct variance with her vehemence.

"Do not dare to presume how 'easy' someone's life may be simply from the way they are now or how their life superficially appears. My life has *not* been 'easy' and it disgusts me that you presume to judge it. I have endured hardships that would make even your Syrene toes curl. You want an idyllic childhood? I grew up on Ovada III colony during the worst of the

troubles there. You want a happy ever after story? I lost my husband whilst still with a babe in arms when he was on a mission commanded by Jean-Luc Picard. But I am a survivor and if I am a survivor of the calibre of Patricia Evans, then I'll take that as a compliment!"

Beverly stood straight, her back ramrod stiff, her hands plunged deep into her med coat pockets as she breathed deeply, and then said, as politely as she was able under the circumstances, "I thank you, Aglaopheme of Sterope, for reporting for your medical this morning. Unfortunately our schedules are rather uncertain at the moment. Please see the Nurse this afternoon, at which point we should have a better idea of when we could arrange a mutually convenient time for a medscan."

Dr Crusher maintained her position, her eyes coolly challenging towards the Syrene still lounging in her chair, but with a graceful swirl Agla vacated it. "I shall consider myself dismissed then." She smiled softly, leaving the office with a small, disdainful smile on her lips.

Beverly Crusher sank down into her recently vacated chair and put her head in her hands, taking deep breaths. She then leaned right back in her chair, staring at the ceiling of her office before speaking to the Enterprise Computer.

"Computer, where is Counselor Troi?"

"Counselor Deanna Troi is at present in the Counselor's Office."

"Crusher to Troi."

"Troi here, Beverly. How may I help you?"

"Have you got a few moments to chat?"

"Of course I have. Any particular subject?"

"Me."

"Mr Data. Mr Data!"

Data turned in some surprise as he was about to enter the turbolift to see young Lucy Evans running down the corridor towards him.

"Mr Data, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"I have something that I wish to tell Captain Picard. Personally. But he seems really difficult to get to see - when he is working he is either on the Bridge or in his Ready Room, which you cannot get to unless you can get onto the Bridge. And Security will not allow me anywhere near any turbolifts that could get me there. Does Captain Picard not like talking to strangers?"

Data stood to one side to allow Lucy Evans to precede him into the turbolift, before following the young Syrene in and waiting on her to request her destination.

"Guest quarters," Lucy stated. "Is it that he perhaps does not like females on the Bridge?"

"Deck 8," added Data, before answering her questions. "Captain Picard is very... sensitive as to who gains access to the Bridge of the Enterprise. Most particularly to those whom he considers to be children."

"But I am not a child... Well, not really."

"It is maybe that 'not really' that may make the difference," Data pointed out gently. "You may have more success in approaching, perhaps, someone like Commander Riker, than the Captain."

"Commander Riker?"

"I have observed that Captain Picard does not listen readily to those he considers children, although there have been exceptions. Commander Riker, however, is considered by many to be far more approachable. Is it not something that I may help you with, Lucy?"

"I'm sorry, Data, but I had particularly wanted to speak to the Captain," Lucy insisted, before adding in a whisper, "it is on something of a sensitive matter."

"If Commander Riker considers your information worthy of escalation, Lucy," Data whispered in reply, "there is no doubt that he would immediately inform the Captain as to its content."

"So that is it?"

"I am sorry Lucy, but this is a Starship, and it is part of how a Starship works. Just as there are chains of command to be observed, there are also chains of communication." He regarded Lucy in silence for a moment, the only sound

being the hum of the turbolift in the background.

"If it is that important, could you not tell your mother? As UFP Emissary, she has the access you require to the Captain to speak confidentially," he suggested helpfully.

"No! E... No, no," Lucy answered a little too quickly. She continued, her voice carrying a note of frustration, her expression a trifle cross. "Oh, never mind. It is nothing THAT important. I shall just have to... explore one of my other options."

Counselor Troi sat patiently in her chair watching her close friend and colleague, Dr Beverly Crusher, circle the room like a bird of prey, nervously wringing her fingers - her jaw tight.

If the truth be known, Deanna had been half expecting something like this for some time now - and it would appear that the personality clash with Aglaopheme of Sterope had just been sufficient to tip the balance of the Chief Medical Officer's temper.

The departure of her son Wesley for Starfleet Academy had been a big turning point in Beverly Crusher's life, for no longer did she have to be both father AND mother to another individual, she was now truly responsible for only one person, herself. This realisation combined with the ever increasing demands of Starfleet medical had had Counselor Troi shrewdly watching Dr Crusher for signs of strain - but Beverly Crusher was made of sterner stuff, and she had herself spotted the hairline cracks in her commitment before Deanna was even aware of them.

"I mean usually, normally, I would NEVER have allowed someone like that woman to get under my guard like that. I mean she is so damned irritating - but I have dealt with worse." Beverly gesticulated with her hands as she said, "Oh, it's just... Oh, I don't know!"

"What don't you know?"

Beverly looked at Deanna, her face serious. "I just don't know why it does not seem enough any more."

"Maybe it has done too good a job?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe your work has been a little too effective in filling your life, plugging the gaps - or rather those bits not filled by Wes." Deanna Troi smiled. "Maybe it is expecting too much of it to expect it to fill the kind of space left by your son?"

"But we have been apart before."

"That was a different kind of separation. Before was more of a separation due to location of callings, you at Starfleet. Wes, here aboard the Enterprise. This time it is more - it is a separating of the ways. Your lives are simply taking branching paths. The previous occasion was only ever temporary, whereas this one is..."

"Permanent," Beverly finished for her. Sitting glumly beside the Counselor, she put her chin on her hand. "What's the cure?"

"Spoken like the physician you are." Deanna gave her a disapproving look. "And it's just not that simple. You, Dr Beverly Crusher, have got to decide what you want."

"Oh. Is that all?"

"Beverly, be serious."

"I *am* being serious. I don't know what I want, in all honesty I don't. Now I know what I wish, if just to make my life a little easier."

"Well, what do you wish?" Deanna folded her arms, and leaned back in her chair, crossing her slender legs.

"I wish I was not so tired of fighting to do this, and to do that, on every occasion that warrants our help. I understand the rules and regulations governing resources, but sometimes Starfleet Medical becomes almost a contradiction in terms. I mean, I do know from first hand experience the kind of bureaucrats running it - but sometimes I feel I am in charge of a high tech ambulance service instead of one of the foremost medical facilities available. That's it - that's my boring speech for today."

"No - not at all. Go on. Is there anything else that you wish for?"

"I wish that there were not quite so many more politically aware potential CMO's of the Enterprise snapping at my heels at the chance of obtaining such a prestigious post. Oh, I know I'm good... damned good, but how long am I going to be good enough? And then, when I'm not, where do I go, what do I do? What is next, Deanna?"

"We all go through this, Beverly; it's natural that at points in our lives we go through key decision periods, when we review what we have done, and decide what we want to achieve next."

"You make it sound so easy," complained Beverly.

"Well, for some of us it is maybe not so easy - those of us that aim high and achieve to the same level." Deanna looked at the Doctor, her dark eyes shrew. "There is no failure in aiming .. different."

"Aiming different? What kind of hokey phrase is that, Deanna?"

"Aiming for an alternative goal, for a goal that may not be discernible to anyone but yourself."

"A change of direction?" Beverly Crusher pulled a small mowe of consideration. "Do not misunderstand me Counselor, I like... I *love* my work aboard the Enterprise. I've never even really thought about ever doing anything outside of Starfleet - its been part of my life for so long now. Hell, it has almost *been* my life, in fact."

"Maybe that is part of the problem," Deanna observed. "Familiarity does breed..."

"Oh, please don't say contempt."

"I would prefer to say, maybe *complacency* or *contentment*, depending on the person."

"Well, I hope you have put me in the latter category. But point taken, I will reflect upon my personal goals - and probably decide that I like exactly where I am now." Beverly Crusher stood, stretching as she did so.

"Then that will be something achieved," Deanna pointed out, "and Chief Medical Officer of the flagship of Starfleet is not such a bad achievement, is it now?"

"No." Beverly looked at Deanna with a wry smile, and a self conscious look, as she said, "I haven't done so badly have I?"

The door comm chimed out its hail into the subsequent silence, at which point Deanna Troi looked at Beverly in puzzled surprise.

"Come," she called out, striding over to the door to meet the visitor, who in fact was Data.

"Counselor... Dr Crusher." The android officer acknowledged them both before looking from one to the other and realising he might have been interrupting a private conversation.

"I am sorry - I did not intend to disturb -"

"No, Data, it's not a problem. I'm just on my way to sickbay," the Doctor replied.

"It is to both of you that I wish to speak," Data stated calmly. "I have in fact an invitation to both of you from Thelxepia of Achelous."

"If it is about the reception prior to the Yrice, Data, I understood from Patricia that all senior crewmembers had actually been already invited," Deanna interrupted as she went to pick up her files.

"That is indeed true, Counselor. But the invitation I refer to is not for the reception, but for the Yrice itself."

There was silence. Both Counselor and Doctor looked at each other before Dr Crusher gave a low, long whistle much like Geordi La Forge when he was presented with something of a bombshell. This reaction drew a look of surprise from Deanna, and one of almost envy from Data. Whistling was one thing that he had yet to master, yet it came so easily to Humans.

"The Yrice? The actual ceremony itself?" Deanna Troi's face was surprised to the point of shock. "Data, are you sure? I mean it isn't possible that you misinterpreted her meaning?"

"No, I am quite sure Counselor. Syrene Elder Thelxepia instructs you to speak to Emissary Evans on ceremony protocol and dress."

"That sounds like a genuine invitation to me," Beverly said. "What in heaven's name has brought this on?"

"What in heaven's name indeed!" agreed Deanna. "It is an undeniable honour, but I cannot help thinking that this is all just a little..."

"Too quick? Too premature?" Dr Crusher suggested.

"Too fast," Deanna replied, her face serious. "From total silence to ceremony invitation all within less than 48 hours... It's almost as suspicious as it is accelerated!"

"But we're not going to turn it down, are

we now? What time are we all due to report to the reception and ceremony, Data?" Crusher asked.

"There is to be a three hour recess for the reception prior to the ceremony itself at 1900 hours. I will be attending the reception only, as the invitation to the Yrice itself has been extended only to yourself, Doctor, and Counselor Troi. Thelxepia was quite specific about my exclusion."

"Why?"

"I am apparently a subject of some controversy between the Syrene due to my male form, although some of the Syrene at least seem convinced that a machine cannot possess gender."

"And how do you feel about that, Data?" Deanna asked him, determined not to be satisfied by the careful neutrality of his voice.

"Feel?" Data tilted his head to one side as if in puzzled inquiry, before answering, "Why, I FEEL nothing, Counselor; I am, after all, an android."

Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi exchanged glances, eyebrows raised.

"Yes, of course," Deanna replied. "Silly me."

The setting was the banquet room, but the hospitality had all the excellence of Ten Forward, Guinan having personally involved herself in the arrangements for the event. Data stood with Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi, and watched with his own distinctive air of observation the activities going on about him. The first thing he had noticed was that Guinan appeared to be no stranger to the Syrene delegates, and indeed seemed to be on terms of some familiarity with some of them, most particularly Pisinooe, which precluded the explanation that they had met for the first time within the last 48 hours. But Data knew better than to question Guinan about her past, although he was sorely tempted to do so. Guinan was usually very mysterious and incredibly cryptic about any aspect of her background, except on those odd occasions when one was able to tap into a rich vein of her experience during the process of idle conversation at the bar in Ten Forward. Guinan sidled past bearing a platter of hors d'oevres, bound for the far side of the room.

"Data," she said out of the side of her mouth as she sidled past, "you're staring again!"

Data immediately averted his attention to the entrance to the room, the doors of which had just opened to admit Commander Riker and Captain Picard, in their Starfleet dress uniforms for the occasion. The two commanding officers paused upon entering the reception, obviously unprepared for the sight that met their eyes as they entered the fray.

For, amidst the complement of invited Enterprise crew and their guests, mainly those who had been directly involved in the Syrene assimilation project to date, were the Syrenusae themselves. And for the first time, certainly aboard the Enterprise and possibly for the first time in the annals of the UFP, they were wearing what appeared to be ceremonial dress.

A full suit of black, high to neck and close to limb covered the long length of every one of them, making them appear taller and possibly more intimidating than ever; an observation that even Deanna Troi had found herself making on first entering the room. In addition to this, a large sheet of material, distinctly coloured, was then worn over the top - cunningly swathed and then fastened or pinned by intricately wrought metal clasps. The final effect was a startling explosion of colour against the banqueting room's stark bow view of deep space.

"Well, well, Number One," Picard observed wryly as they paused upon entering. "Almost worth the trouble on our part, wouldn't you say?"

He nodded a greeting to one of his crewmen who went past upon someone's arm, also in dress uniform.

"Indeed, sir." Nodding his head, Riker agreed, a wide smile on his face. "Fascinating."

"Indeed. I wonder if the colours actually mean anything?"

"They do. If you care to look across at Patricia Evans and Lucy, their colours are quite different from those worn by Thelxepia of Achelous over there, or indeed Aglaopheme of Sterope, in the corner. Which would suggest..."

"Clan or family colours. Like old Earth tartans or heraldic costume." Picard nodded in agreement with his First Officer as they slowly made their way across the room, nodding and

smiling as they went. "Which does beg a very interesting question, Will."

"Which is, sir?"

"With a people of such mystery existing within the Federation, to all intents and purposes undiscovered, what in God's name are we doing challenging new frontiers, if the old ones remain insufficiently examined?"

"Keeping our minds open, maybe, sir," Riker replied.

Picard simply smiled at his First Officer, and allowed him to lead the final steps up to where Deanna Troi, Beverly Crusher and Data stood in deep conversation.

"My compliments, Ladies." Riker's smile broadened as he perceived the length of silver-white wrap worn over the top of his two colleagues' uniforms.

"As it is a cultural mission, the CMO and myself have been advised to dress appropriately for the occasion," Deanna informed him reprovingly, but there was an irresistible twinkle in her eyes as she spoke.

"Well," said Will Riker, his tone contemplative, "I think I have identified the colours of the House of Achelous, as modelled by the exceptional Thelxepia, the House of Sterope as worn by the perceptive Aglaopheme, and the House of Gaea, as seen on the Emissary and her daughter. But I do not think I recognize this particular House colour."

He indicated Deanna's wrap with a considering finger.

"You surprise me, Will," Deanna smiled. "Try a guess."

"My, my..." Riker released his most wolfish grin in reply. "White... or is it grey? I give up - pray tell me your House, most beautiful ladies."

Beverly Crusher's hastily stifled laugh briefly caught the attention of Picard who was standing to one side ostensibly discussing ship's business with Commander Data.

"Well, Data chose the colour," Deanna replied. "He seemed a little... hurt over the Syrene decision to exclude him from the main ceremony, and so Beverly had the idea of giving

him the task of selecting us appropriate colours in deference to the occasion - as we are the first Starfleet Officers ever to attend such a function after all."

"You seem to be getting into this in a big way," Riker said, a note of surprise in his voice, before he turned to address Data, who was still deep in conversation with Captain Picard. "Data, I hear you had a hand in dressing Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi?"

"No." Data then instantaneously divined the true intent of the question, and amended his answer accordingly. "Yes - if you are referring to my selection of the 'caparison'."

"Well, what else would he mean, Data?" asked Crusher with wicked humour.

"With the help of Pisinoe of Achelous, I was able to cross-reference what she and other Syrene have told me about colours chosen, related to originating worlds and identifying characteristics. It was all quite fascinating," Data carried on, ignoring the Doctor's low aside.

"Caparison?"

"That is the correct Syrene term for this mode of dress, sir."

"Were Pisinoe and the other Syrene still quite happy to discuss such things with you, Data?" Dr Crusher asked him, a slight frown upon her face. "I thought they had decided you were male gender."

"I believe that Pisinoe has rationalised that as an android, I am not, to the letter of the word, a male. Therefore, she has not breached Syrene etiquette by speaking to me on a wide range of what are considered taboo subjects."

"Word or spirit?" Dr Crusher observed somewhat sardonically, and Troi, catching her words, hid a smile. Obviously her medical colleague had also been party to those moments when Pisinoe of Achelous, a vamprite of over two metres easily dwarfing Data's slim frame, ex-Orion assassin and Starfleet ambassador's widow, had regarded their android colleague with a look that could only be equated with that of the appetite of a starving man. However, Data's manners, gentle quality and frequently self-effacing ways seemed to have the woman totally at a loss with regard to how to deal with him. As much as the Syrene fascinated Data as a source of information, Data fascinated the Syrene in other

ways.

Deanna felt an attack of the giggles threatening, but managed to turn it into a hastily concocted fit of coughing before she caught the gaze of either Beverly Crusher or Will Riker.

"You were explaining the basis of your choice of colours for the Doctor and Counselor Troi," Picard reminded him, his suspiciously sharp gaze transferring itself from the face of Deanna Troi who was in the process of trying to compose herself.

"Indeed, sir. There are a number of surprisingly complex variables to be taken into consideration upon making the appropriate choice - particularly in the case of Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi, when one considers their very different origins..."

"Yes, yes, Data," Picard agreed hastily in an effort to head off what looked like turning into one of Commander Data's lectures. Data, realising that this was the sign he was most often given when a more concise answer was required of him, obviously cut his narration to the point with some effort.

"The most obvious choice was the House of Enterprise, sir," he said succinctly.

A slow smile crept over Jean-Luc Picard's face.

"I approve, Mr Data." He smiled again, took one last look at the cloth on the shoulders of his two crew members, and then moved off to answer the beckoning wave of Emissary Evans to himself and Dr Crusher as she stood talking to Pisinoe of Achelous and two others of the Syrene delegation.

"A sensitive choice, Data, and one well made." Troi smiled her approval, fingering her communicator badge which was acting as fixing pin on the length of material.

"Thank you, Counselor," Data replied equably, and then frowned as he tried quickly to identify precisely what qualified the act as sensitive before he lost the essence of the moment.

Patricia Evans and her daughter were standing in conversation with some of the Syrene delegation as the Captain and Chief Medical Officer finally joined the group.

"I see you followed my advice." The Emissary smiled at Dr Crusher, indicating the length of fabric draped over the Doctor's shoulder.

"Indeed we have, thank you, and as with your other advice, Emissary, it has been quite sound." Dr Crusher smiled in return. It was then that the Doctor caught a proper look at Lucy Evans's face beneath her head of thickly braided raven black hair. There was no denying the dark circled eyes and chalky white palor - the young girl looked really quite unwell.

"Are you still not quite right, Lucy?" she asked quietly.

"No... no, Dr Crusher. If no one thinks me too rude, I think I should retire," Lucy explained graciously. "I am sorry, Mother, Captain Picard, Dr Crusher."

"You are excused, Lucy," the Emissary stated, quietly watching her daughter go with concerned eyes. "I think this may all be a little overwhelming for her."

The Captain, Emissary and Dr Crusher were now standing on their own, the Syrene with them having started to talk amongst themselves, a little way off.

"It must be something of an ordeal, to meet so many of one's race when you are so used to being so dispersed across different worlds," Picard observed.

"You may be right," Evans agreed. "I am wondering if perhaps Lucy was ready for such a meeting."

Dr Crusher looked sharply at the Emissary, feeling for a moment as if the UFP representative was talking double sense.

"Is she still complaining of tiredness?" she asked Evans.

"Yes. Considering I set out on this assignment as a way of... reaching out to Lucy, she has seen very little of any benefit." Patricia Evans sighed deeply. "I had hoped that this project would not only help the Syrenusae, but that Lucy would see a side of the UFP and Starfleet that may encourage her to consider applying for the Academy."

"The Academy?" Picard's eyebrows were raised. "I had no idea you were ambitious to have

Lucy follow in your footsteps, Emissary."

"Well, hopefully not EXACTLY in my footsteps." Evans grimaced slightly, the exchanged glance between Emissary and Captain Picard making Beverly Crusher feel almost excluded. "But I do feel Starfleet has a lot to offer Lucy - and I feel that my daughter has much to offer Starfleet in return... perhaps more than they could anticipate."

"Indeed?" Picard looked hard at the Emissary and then continued in his forthright manner, "But have you considered whether she has the temperament to contend with the discipline of Starfleet, Emissary Evans?"

"In other words, will she succeed where I failed, Jean-Luc?" Patricia answered his question with a question of her own.

"If you will," he replied levelly, unfazed by the implicit challenge.

"Will you never let me forget that incident with the damn Academy shuttle, Jean-Luc Picard?" Evans suddenly hissed, much to Crusher's surprise. This was the closest she had seen the UFP Emissary come to actually losing her temper so far.

"Exactly what happened during this notorious incident?" Dr Crusher asked, attempting to defuse the suddenly charged conversation with a light laugh. "It could not have been THAT bad - you are both, after all, still here to tell the tale."

An uncharacteristic snort of disagreement from Picard and a reluctant sigh from Evans said otherwise.

"We were on a training flight, and there was a silly argument. Cadets should argue, it is, after all, an intrinsic part of the learning process. So this argument arose from a rather fatuous remark about the relative strengths of standard issue shuttlecraft hulls."

"You did not have to put five lives in danger, Patricia, to prove your point. Five young lives. It was an act of gross irresponsibility!" Picard bit out, his raised tones catching the attention of Commander Riker who was standing a little way off across the room.

"Oh, come on, Jean-Luc, so we dangled from our seats until the Academy support team could release us. Anyone would think the

biggest danger was to your reputation as one of the Academy's highest achievers." With a deep sigh, she stopped herself and regarded the Captain somewhat balefully. "But yes, with the benefit of hindsight and my extra years... it was a damn stupid thing to have done."

As she finished that sentence, it was as if Patricia Evans aged before Beverly Crusher's eyes and the Emissary actually looked much closer to Picard's age than ever, she reflected sympathetically.

"And you are probably right about Lucy's temperament. I have asked myself, maybe the wariness of discipline, the tendency to buck any system of authority is something intrinsic to our race, I just don't know." She turned to look at the assembled throng. "All I do know is that I have to give her a chance. Like they all have to be given a chance - they are not so bad really..."

"Just misunderstood?" asked Beverly with a smile.

"Oh yes - Doctor, I must apologise for Agla's behaviour. That was quite unacceptable, and I will insist that your nurse receives a full apology from Aglaopheme as soon as the Yrice has finished."

"Thank you, Patricia. I am sure Nurse Ogawa will appreciate that," Beverly said graciously.

"Oh... and Commander Riker - " Patricia Evans had noticed William Riker and Geordi La Forge making their way across the room towards them - "and Chief Engineer. I must also apologise for Molpe and Ligia being caught in Engineering; that was also unacceptable."

"Well, it was not maybe the fact that we found them in Engineering, unescorted, Emissary," Geordi pointed out, "but that they were trying to gain access at a secure terminal at the time. Luckily Data did interrupt them."

Evans looked most uncomfortable as Picard and Riker exchanged glances and Dr Crusher stared at the floor of the banqueting room as if it had become of fascinating interest.

"I can only apologise again, Captain. I am not seeking to defend their actions in any way," Evans sought to reassure the command staff, "but you must all understand that the Syrene on board, are by their very nature exceptionally inquisitive. Which is part of the reason why they

are here at all."

"I can understand that, Emissary." Will Riker had folded his arms across his chest. "But we have done our best to treat the delegation with those freedoms attributed to guests of Starfleet. I frankly found that incident to be a blatant abuse of our trust."

"I understand, Commander," Patricia Evans informed him stiffly. "I will convey your feelings on the matter to those concerned with all due haste. Captain, Commander... Dr Crusher."

With that, the Emissary made her excuses and left the group.

"I would be that much happier if I thought I knew which side OUR Emissary was on." The ironic tone of Will Riker's voice was not lost on Beverly Crusher.

"Give her a chance, Will. She has got a difficult job here, trying to balance everybody's interests whilst offending no one."

"Have there been any other major breaches of security Will?" Captain Picard was regarding his First Officer with interest. The incident in Engineering had been reported to him at the same time it had been reported to Commander Riker, and the Commander had then been somewhat more vocal about abuse of hospitality.

"No, sir. Thanks to Mr Worf's security measures and the crew having been so vigilant - the latter mostly due to the unnerving occasion of having such a large group of individuals so rarely seen away from fringe colony worlds or the gutters of some of the more disreputable class M planets of the Federation. However, the Syrene still seem to get everywhere... From the number of complaints from the crew, you would think there were surely more than a mere 13 of them!"

"Point taken, Number One. Hopefully, with the Yrice ceremony about to take place, that will be the end of our problems for at least a few days. But get Mr Worf to step up security by Holodeck 3."

"Aye sir," Commander Riker responded promptly.

Data walked briskly down the corridor of the Enterprise bound for the Bridge, but as he stopped at the smooth doors to turbo lift one he

heard an unusual thump from the corridor branching off opposite.

As he went to investigate, he became aware of the fact that the Enterprise seemed a lot less busy than he would have expected at this hour, particularly as the corridors could almost be deemed to be the arteries of the Galaxy Class vessel. Data rounded the corner, to find a crewman slumped across the floor, "Sir..." The crewman swayed upon his hands and knees at the feet of the android. "I don't appear to be able to get up."

One effortless helping hand under his forearm soon had that particular problem solved, but once on his feet, the crewman appeared to be in no fit state to remain there unassisted.

"Data to sickbay."

"Selaar here. How may I be of assistance, Commander?"

"I have just found a member of crew who appears to be suffering from some form of debilitating illness. It has rendered him unable to function normally."

"Yet another one." The ironic tone in Selaar's voice always became more pronounced when the Vulcan Doctor was under stress.

"This sudden outbreak is threatening to exceed sickbay capacity. Commander Data, can I suggest you assist the patient in returning to his quarters and I will get a team to attend to him as soon as I am able."

"Understood, Doctor."

Commander Data positioned himself under the crewman's arm, to be better able to help the man to his quarters.

"It's OK, Commander. Don't you worry about me, I'll just settle down here and get a quick forty winks, then I'll be fine."

"I do not think that closing one eye in flippant or frivolous manner any number of times will improve your condition sufficiently for you to resume your duties," Data informed his fellow crew member helpfully. "I think it would be for the best if you allowed me to assist you in getting back to your cabin, as the Doctor instructed."

"Yes, sir," the crewman answered

obediently, staring with some consternation at Data's poker straight face.

Captain Picard and Commander Riker were discussing the outbreak of the mystery illness over hot tea, both of them having been on duty for what was coming up to double shifts in one capacity or another. Picard was perched on the edge of his desk, his face a mask of discipline, not allowing the fatigue to creep through by sheer force of will. Only his voice betrayed him, an undertone of terseness evident, frustration at having to reduce speed and being in charge of a dwindling crew growing more evident by the second.

"Dr Selaar." He hailed the Vulcan Doctor abruptly via his communicator. "Has Dr Crusher been raised yet? It is imperative that we get her out of that damned ceremony and back on duty as quickly as possible."

"Negative, Captain." Selaar's cool voice came back. "No one has entered or left holodeck 3 in 18 hours, and the Syrene delegation have left strict instructions that they are not to be disturbed under any circumstances."

Captain Picard looked at Commander Riker, and Will Riker interpreted something in his commanding officer's gaze that made him say quickly, "They were the explicit instructions left by Thelxepia of Achelous, Captain." He added, "And she is an honoured guest of Starfleet. We have been instructed to abide by her requirements, and in this instance, they have been made very, very clear."

Picard the diplomat hesitated, his face both serious and thoughtful as he weighed up the pros and cons of the argument to hand. But it was Picard the leader, Captain of the Enterprise, the man ultimately responsible for the well-being of his crew, who finally hit the communicator.

"Picard to Crusher. Emergency, Doctor. Please report to me now." The Captain looked briefly at Riker before hitting his communicator again. "Picard to Data. Commander, increase speed to Starbase Lima to warp factor six."

"Aye sir," came the response.

And with that, Captain Picard calmly moved to sit down at his desk, and started to stir his fragrant Earl Grey tea, the smell of bergamot spicing the air.

"The Syrene may well be most upset, sir," Will Riker cautioned him.

"They will be more upset if they are left stranded in deep space because the entire crew of the Enterprise has been knocked out by some mystery virus, Number One." Captain Picard released a deep breath, and put a tired hand up to rub his forehead.

"Having had the fortune of being able to study the Syrene at close quarters, I will hazard a guess that they will only be put out if it suits their ends. But I have taken your caution to heart, Will, and should the situation require it, I will apologise most profusely to Thelxepia and the entire Syrene delegation, as soon as this damned crisis is over!"

"It should be very noisy at Starbase Lima then, Captain."

"How so, Number One?" Picard asked him with a frown.

"Why, with everyone apologising to everybody else at the end of this trip, the Federation assimilation team will probably be unable to get a word in edgewise!" Commander Riker observed with a weary smile.

The corridors of the Enterprise seemed strangely deserted as Beverly Crusher almost ran in her haste to get to one of the turbo-lifts that would take her to the Bridge. It was late; she had left the Yrice ceremony halfway through, and the CMO felt decidedly unwell as the only sustenance allowed during the Yrice was the ceremonial wine that had been transported aboard with the party from the House of Sterope. In addition to her rather sore head, her mind was spinning with so much information that she felt as if it was about to explode.

She had spent the larger part of the past 18 hours, sitting cross-legged upon the floor of holodeck 3, which had been programmed to look remarkably like an authentic wooden floored temple overlooking a purple misted valley. At first Beverly had only half listened to the droning, lisping voice of Pisinoe, followed by the crisp tones of Thelxepia, reciting the Syrene ceremonial in what appeared to be a well used oral tradition. She could see Troi opposite, listening intently, both of them having been apprised of the ceremonial phases prior to their attendance. Recognition, reunification and then a phase of

debate, during which period the question of Syrene assimilation was to be brought up. Beverly Crusher found herself still amazed at the cultural depth and substance of this disparate community, that had not only survived the vastness of galaxies but also the brutality and isolation of discrimination and prejudice.

Slowly, without realising it, the hypnotic quality of Thelxepia's words droned on and penetrated her consciousness without the CMO having put much effort into it as Thelxepia had sat with her eyes closed and her hands gently resting on her lap, telling a story.

It was a story of a pool, a deep pool, the deepest pool known in 5 galaxies and at the bottom of the pool lay the most fabulous wealth and power. About the pool sit five Syrene guardians, pledged to protect its contents from all those who seek to plunder, pillage or prey on its depths. But, as the Syrene had also to provide for themselves, the creator had given them the power of charming, by their songs, all who heard them, the power to persuade anybody who approaches them. There was no home-coming for the man who drew near them unawares and heard a Syrene voice; no welcome from his wife, no children brightening at their father's return. For with their clear high song the Syrene bewitch, leaving only the mouldering skeletons of beings whose withered skin still hangs upon their bones, because they stopped to listen. But should they sing in vain, it had also been decreed that they should live only as long as it would take until one hearing their song should pass by unmoved. Then they should throw themselves into the pool, where they would either be consumed by the waters or turned into another form, the latter part of the story being somewhat unclear, accompanied as it was by numerous Syrene mutterings and shouts.

Dr Beverly Crusher had been unable to avoid a distasteful shudder. It was after all a ghoulish tale, and one that seemed quite fantastic even by Earth standards. Ever the scientist, Dr Crusher then found herself contemplating its origins. Was it fiction, created as a means of filling the gap presented by the Syrene lack of origin or 'roots', or a fable, or was it myth, allowing the Syrene to embody their own ideas of natural or social phenomena in a way that they understood? Or was it more than just that - was it, maybe, some form of allegory for the very existence of the Syrene? Doctor Crusher's curiosity had been piqued by this and her sharp analytical mind had already applied itself to a logical extrapolation that had been gripped by the

continuing words of the Syrene Elder.

The Syrenusae had no culture in the conventional sense as was more normally accepted and recognised within the Federation. With no world of their own, they lacked a focus for attention for their achievements. They had no obvious society, no fine buildings to showcase their race... had they ever achieved great things in technology, science or the arts? There was no record of it. No, the Syrene had nothing, save other Syrene. These individuals, strongly interconnected across vast tracts of space by empathic/telepathic links, woven into a system of clans or ' Houses' to prevent their being lost to each other, prepared to hunt missing individuals down over decades if required, as demonstrated by Thelxepia's search for the lost House of Gaea.

The Syrene's only documented achievement was their ability to survive the ravages of space, suspicion and the resentment they aroused in other races. The only thing of theirs that endured time was their kind, and if not individuals, then their ' Houses', their creed, their genealogy or genetic lineage... Their gene pool! This intuitive leap made Dr Crusher's spine tingle as the larger part of the mystery that was the Syrene race finally clicked into place and raised yet another, big, question.

Why was it symbolised in the story by wealth and power?

The progress of the Enterprise was about to be impeded even further.

"Perimeter alert, Captain," Worf boomed out from the rear of the Bridge.

"Identify!" Captain Picard snapped out, the lines of fatigue on his face clear for the remaining Bridge crew to see.

"It... has gone, sir!" replied Worf, puzzlement clear in his deep baritone voice.

"Could it be another glitch?" Riker questioned the Security Chief, frowning as he did so, tired lines clear in his face as well as he strode towards Worf's position.

"Unknown, sir. As the last problem has still yet to be adequately explained," the Klingon Officer intoned cautiously, "I would have to do some further research into both anomalies."

"Data?" Riker continued.

"There was insufficient diagnostic data available from the recent system anomaly you are referring to, to make any adequate study," Commander Data informed them. "System trace tables revealed no additional information other than the 15 second delay indicated by systems sensors. I will start diagnostic scans immediately to see if a problem can be identified."

The officer at Ops then inclined his head slightly before going on to say in a warning tone, "However, I would suggest that if the sensor equipment was not under suspicion of being faulty, such a reading could be interpreted as a vessel at the edge of our sensor range implementing a cloaking device."

"Agreed!" boomed Worf. "Suggest we go to red alert, Captain."

The Enterprise was already standing at yellow alert due to the rapid spread of the mystery sickness that had reduced the staff of the Enterprise to a meagre skeleton crew.

"If it is another vessel, Captain, it is highly suspicious that they are moving at the edge of our sensor range without attempting to communicate. It would be a fair assumption that if they have a cloaking device they also have fairly sensitive sensor equipment," Riker advised his Captain.

"Agreed, Number One, but I have no wish to alarm our remaining crew who are already under incredible stress," Picard replied as he returned to his chair and sank thankfully into its depths.

"Is it possible we could outrun them to Starbase Lima?" suggested Riker. "As much as I hate to cut and run, the present state of the crew..."

"Not an option, Number One. The odds are more in our favour in open space, rather than dragging a ship of potential hostiles to Starbase Lima for a showdown - if there is indeed even a ship out there! Let's find out, shall we?" Picard gave a deep sigh. "Full stop, Conn. Issue a message, Mr Worf, all channels, all frequencies, requesting that the vessel identify itself."

"Aye, sir," Worf acknowledged. "Should..."

But the Klingon officer was interrupted by the sound of Ensign Whitby crashing to the floor

from her position at one of the rear Bridge stations.

"And then there were five," Riker observed with grim amusement.

"Sir?" said Data, who was watching the crewman at the helm slowly slip from his seat under the panel of the Conn controls.

"Sorry, Data, four," Will Riker replied as he went to the aid of the crewman, accompanied by Data, who moved from Ops to push the Conn away from the reclining figure. Worf, meanwhile, was manoeuvring Ensign Whiaby into the recovery position to avoid her choking.

"Merde." Picard closed his eyes and put his fingers to his temples, frowning hard.

"How are you feeling Data? Worf?"

The two - the only Bridge crew, save Riker and Picard, still conscious, answered promptly to the Captain's enquiry, "I am functioning within acceptable parameters, Captain."

"...also," Worf agreed

"And you, how are you feeling Number One?"

"Goddamn awful!" Riker returned candidly, to which sentiment his Captain nodded in agreement.

"I would order you to turn in Will, but if you feel as I do..."

"I know that if I shut my eyes, I will probably not open them this side of a fortnight!" yawned Riker, "which at the moment, with a meagre number of crew awake and a potentially hostile vessel within sensor range, does not appeal!"

"Indeed," the Captain replied dryly, "which leads me neatly to my next question - where is the damn Chief Medical Officer?"

"Here, Captain."

Beverly Crusher walked onto the Bridge from turbolift one, obviously startled to see the place manned by only four officers, then alarmed to see two more crewmembers unconscious and down. She speedily went to the aid of Ensign Whitby, checking pulse and respiration whilst Worf, Data, Riker and Picard looked on.

"And about time too, Dr Crusher. It would no doubt be a waste of time to ask what detained you?"

"I came as quickly as I could, Captain," Beverly insisted, wishing, as she bent over her patient, that she did not feel as if her traitorous stomach was about to leap out of her body of its own accord at any moment.

"You look rather pale, Beverly," Riker put in, his voice concerned.

"I think I ate, or more likely drank, something that did not agree with me during the Yrice ceremony, Will," Beverly explained shakily. "That evil substance they transported aboard in that crate had the taste of lubricating fluid and the kick of an ill tempered mule."

"Well, as fascinating as that may be, Doctor," Picard snapped tersely, "I would rather discuss the well-being of my crew - or rather the lack of it - than your adoption of Syrene drinking habits!"

"I do beg your pardon Jean-Luc, but am I to infer from that remark that you believe that the Enterprise crew is NOT my top priority?" The prickly undertone in her voice was clear for all to hear. "Because I can assure you otherwise."

"The clear evidence, Doctor," Picard returned coldly, using her title with deliberation, "is that the Enterprise has less than a skeleton crew to attend to those duties essential to the running of a Starship. My people are lying in sickbay, in their quarters, in corridors... and as no doubt you may have noticed, even on the Bridge."

Beverly Crusher straightened up onto her feet from where she had been attending to Whitby, aware that she was on the receiving end of the closest Jean-Luc Picard had ever come to giving her a public dressing down.

"What I want to know, Doctor, is what are you going to do about it? Because for the present, Chief Medical Officer Doctor Crusher, irrespective of other concerns, I want my ship put first, at whatever the cost."

Riker looked from Crusher to Picard. His Captain was tired, exhausted from enduring a double shift and the onset of this curious malaise. For him to upbraid his CMO in public, in this manner, was out of character for Jean-Luc Picard, and Commander Riker braced himself to intervene. He could not allow his Commanding

Officer to say anything more that he would undoubtedly regret after a good night's sleep.

Chief Medical Officer Beverly Crusher regarded her Captain with wide, almost luminescent blue eyes. Her cheeks had coloured pink in her embarrassment and humiliation, and she had started to blink rapidly, possibly in an effort to prevent her eyes filling in a very unprofessional manner before her Commanding Officer. She was tired also, and such a diatribe from such an unexpected source, for all its reasoned tone and lack of volume, was truly the last straw..

"I apologise, Captain Picard, if I have given you any reason to doubt my commitment to resolving this present crisis," Dr Crusher replied stoutly, her jaw quivering only slightly. "I was delayed momentarily in sickbay before reporting to the Bridge, after I left the Yrice ceremony immediately upon receiving your hail. Dr Selaar had already conducted the first batch of tests which we had discussed before we agreed upon the requirement for a second batch with a wider sample base - the results of which may take some time to collate."

The Doctor paused, appearing to draw strength from her words, and as the flush receded from her cheekbones, it revealed the alarming pallor of her face.

"Dr Selaar is an excellent medical officer, and has done exactly what I would have, had I been called any earlier. The symptoms appear to be extreme tiredness, and as you have pointed out already, crew members have already succumbed to a state of what appears to be deep, non-threatening sleep. Both Dr Selaar and I are mystified by what has caused this incapacitation - but the most obvious point of interest is that non-Human species appear to be totally unaffected by this condition. Therefore, my recommendation as Chief Medical Officer, Captain Picard, is to charge those non-Human members of crew with the task of delivering the Enterprise to Starbase Lima with all possible haste - my prognosis at this point being that it is very likely that every Human aboard this vessel will eventually succumb to this condition. No doubt, once at Starbase Lima, their 'experts' will succeed where my team has failed to resolve this problem. In the meantime, I will return to sickbay to continue our efforts."

Dr Crusher spun on her heel and marched towards the turbolift to the rear of the Bridge, her head held rigidly high, before she paused

momentarily by the doors.

"And Captain, with regard to the question of my commitment to my Starfleet duties... With all due respect, sir, the day that no longer applies is the day I resign from Starfleet medical. On which subject, it is both timely and heartening to know that I am not indispensable."

With that, the CMO strode into the turbo lift and left with a swish of its doors in furious silence.

The Captain watched her go, before releasing a deeply held breath as a long sigh. "Oh, Hell!" Jean-Luc Picard bit out grimly.

FIVE

The communicator chirruped again, and insistently again... and again.

"What... What?" Beverly Crusher jerked back into reality, shaking her head frantically in an effort to clear away the shadows of sleep from her mind. She looked at the time displayed on the wall of her office.

"Oh, my God. Oh, no. No, no, no. Six hours!" she wailed as she pulled a distracted hand through her thick chestnut hair, blinking with owl-like intensity. "Who let me sleep for six hours."

Groaning, she sat back in her chair and balefully regarded her loaded desk (the piles of reference material having made such a comfortable pillow) feeling that she had just wasted six whole hours of precious research time. The glass of water, thoughtfully provided by one of the nurses upon her furious return from the Bridge, sat untouched next to the batch of results brought in a little later by Dr Selaar. Beverly gave an involuntary wry smile as she recalled the Vulcan Doctor's characteristically poised, drawled advice to turn in for the night and get some sleep. With a deep breath, Beverly pulled herself out of her chair.

"Oh, boy. Oh boy, oh boy," Dr Crusher whispered, mantra-like, to herself, unable to stop her body sinking back down into her seat again. She was not only in possession of a hideous headache, but actually felt physically nauseous, as if she was about to be very sick - a rare occurrence in these days of ultra-high-tech nerve response treatment, which would make those

(occasions when it did occur seem so much worse, Beverly reflected gingerly. Dr Crusher swallowed with some difficulty before looking hard and long at the glass of water left by the nursing staff the night before. Finally, firmly, she pushed it to one side. She could not face one milli-litre of liquid intake at present - and that included good old H₂O.

Her communicator sounded yet again. "Troi to Crusher."

Beverly gave a slow sigh at the hail. There really was no rest for the wicked, no peace for the good, after all.

"Crusher here, Deanna, go ahead," she croaked on hitting her communicator badge.

"Beverly?" The surprise in Deanna's voice was almost palpable. "Beverly, that IS you?"

"Well, you were the one hailing me, Counselor. And I think it's me. Mind you, my head gives a new definition to the word 'ache', and my stomach feels like it's been phasered from the inside. Apart from that..."

"You are OK, Beverly? How do you feel? You are fully conscious?"

Dr Crusher looked down at her communicator in some surprise, before raising her eyes to the ceiling and offering up a silent prayer.

"Deanna, is there any reason why I should NOT be OK? And why are you starting to sound more like a physician than a counselor?"

"Stay there, Beverly. I will join you in sickbay," was the quick reply - and was that relief that Dr Crusher could detect in her voice?

"OK... OK," Beverly muttered darkly. "Believe me, I'm not going anywhere. For a little while, at least."

She leaned back to close her eyes with a pained expression on her face, one delicate hand to her temples. She coughed gently, experimentally, just sufficiently for it to be raised high enough to be heard in sickbay proper.

"Selaar? Dr Selaar? Are you out there?"

Dr Crusher was helping Dr Selaar move

one of the patients onto the diagnostic bed being used for test examinations when Deanna Troi finally marched, at some speed, into the sickbay facility. As the two Doctors glanced up at the sound of the doors, mid task, they were in good time to see Guinan and Pisinoc following in the wake of the ship's counselor. What's more, Guinan appeared to be carrying a large bulbous brown glass bottle filled with very dark, almost oily looking liquid.

"Oh no," Dr Crusher said, catching sight of the malevolent looking brew. "If that is for me, you had better know that I have given up food and drink - most DEFINITELY drink, for... oh... er... possibly the rest of my life."

"Oh, come now, you don't mean that," Guinan chided her gently, finishing in a theatrical whisper, "after all, it's not many people who are even offered my very special hangover cure - it's all in the fermentation period of one century. That and a few interesting ingredients."

"How do you even know I've got a hangover?" Beverly Crusher fired back weakly.

"How do you know someone has Thaisian Flu?" Guinan placed the bottle on a nearby surface, producing a glass from the folds of her gown. "This is, after all, my own particular field of expertise, Doctor."

Guinan poured and handed Beverly the glass with some ceremony, brimful with the evil-smelling concoction.

"Oh no...I can't!" Beverly grimaced, her nose wrinkling in distaste at the odour assaulting her nostrils.

"Drink it, Dr Crusher, we haven't time for procrastination," Deanna instructed her in a surprisingly firm voice. "We've got problems to deal with that will need a clear head."

Without further ado, Dr Crusher threw Guinan's brewed concoction down her throat with a face frozen in an expression of great distaste and forbearance, followed by a bout of coughing.

"OK," she managed.

"You're welcome," Guinan smiled as only she could at the Doctor, who threw the hostess of Ten Forward a thankless look.

"So, Deanna, exactly what problems are

you talking about?"

"Big ones." Deanna folded her arms across her chest and raised her concerned face to look straight at the CMO. "The most pertinent of them is that at present you, Chief Medical Officer Dr Beverly Crusher, are the only conscious Human aboard the Enterprise."

Counselor Deanna Troi and CMO Dr Beverly Crusher made their way down the eerily silent corridors of the USS enterprise, bound for the Bridge. Their footsteps sounding ridiculously loud in the uncharacteristic silence, the strange atmosphere enhanced by those lights displaying yellow alert status.

"Bridge," Dr Crusher snapped as they finally entered the requisite turbo lift.

"All Bridge access denied," came the polite tones of the Enterprise main computer. Crusher and Troi exchanged glances.

"Now, *that* I do not like the sound of." Beverly muttered under her breath. "Computer, this is CMO Dr Beverly Crusher and ship's Counselor Deanna Troi requesting override to Bridge isolation command."

"Denied." The polite tone had an air of finality about it.

"By whose authority has the Bridge isolation command been invoked?" Deanna Troi asked, leaning against the side of the turbo-lift as she said in a low aside to the Doctor, "I knew I should have left the Yrice with you, Beverly."

"Bridge Isolation command has been invoked by Lt Commander Data," came the reply.

Neither of the two occupants in the lift could resist releasing large sighs of relief.

"Why do I feel like that is probably the best piece of news I have heard in a fortnight?" Dr Crusher asked.

"Probably because it is," Deanna Troi replied before hitting her communicator. "But I still think I should have left the ceremony when you did... Troi to Data."

There was no answer.

"Troi to Data. Data, can you hear me?"

Still there was no answer. Beverly put her hands on her hips and glanced down at the floor, her face serious.

"You don't think that someone could possibly have tampered with Da -"

"Counselor?" Data's even tones were unmistakable.

"Data!" Deanna could not keep the relief from her voice. "Are we pleased to hear you!"

"We?" Data's voice queried. "There is more than one occupant of the turbolift? Voice identification please of other occupant."

Once again the two women exchanged glances, this time at the uncharacteristic formality in their colleague's query.

"Chief Medical Officer Dr Beverly Crusher here, Data. What's the crisis status and why have you sealed off the Bridge, Commander?"

"It was a logical course of action," replied Data, apparently satisfied by the CMO's identification as he explained his actions over the communicators. "I have sent a subspace communication to Starfleet explaining our present difficulties. At present, there remain only 40 individuals aboard the Enterprise who are unaffected by this sickness, conscious and in control of their full faculties, including ourselves. Of those 40, the Syrene delegation forms 32.5%."

"Ah," said Dr Crusher.

"Indeed, Doctor. Unless proven otherwise, it could mean that the Syrene delegation could pose a serious threat to the safety of the Enterprise."

"What about Engineering, Data?" Beverly Crusher interceded. "If there is a threat, should not Engineering be sealed off also?"

"Worf has already secured Engineering, Doctor, as well as isolating the controls of the Battle Bridge. We have undertaken Captain Picard's final instructions, which was to get the Enterprise to Starbase Lima with all possible haste."

"Well, it's nice to know he was listening to at least some of what I said," Dr Crusher observed dryly.

"In that case, Commander, if you remain

where you are, as you seem to have everything under control, then maybe the Doctor and I should try and find out just exactly WHAT is going on here."

"Agreed, Counselor," came back Data's voice. "Do you require access to the armoury?"

"Phasers?" Deanna looked at the Doctor, the full gravity of the situation finally bearing down on both their shoulders. "Do we want phasers, Beverly?"

"I suppose we'd better," Dr Crusher answered with a sigh, pushing her thick chestnut fringe back with a worried hand.

"Armoury access has been updated. You are advised to collect your weapons with extreme caution," Data warned them.

"Thank you, Data. We'll keep in contact," Deanna Troi replied before instructing the turbolift to head for its new destination.

"Well, I suppose we'd better find the Syrene and see if they are actually responsible for all, or indeed any, of this," Beverly Crusher stated. "What a nightmare!"

"How is your head?" Deanna asked her innocently.

"I've just got shot of one headache to have a few others vying to replace it," Beverly replied, "but apart from that, everything is fine with me, Counselor. I mean, I was the one who was stupid enough to wish for a different form of challenge - wasn't I, now?"

"You were indeed," agreed the Counselor.

As it happened, the Counselor and the CMO did not even get as far as the armoury before Commander Data's voice came once more over the communicators. "Data to Dr Crusher"

"Crusher here, Data, proceed."

"The computer is indicating unauthorised entry into shuttlebay 2," Data reported. "I am unable to get a computer fix on the interloper's ID, and have a security complement of only one near that level."

"Understood, Data. We're on our way." Beverly Crusher started to jog down the corridor

towards the nearest turbolift. "We haven't got time to get to the armoury now Deanna, we've got to get to that shuttlebay. It's my bet that whoever is there has the key to this whole damned mess."

"Agreed... but we can still gain access to one of the smaller emergency phaser caches en route. I don't think it would be wise to tackle someone prepared to steal a shuttlecraft with our bare hands, Beverly."

"Agreed, agreed." Dr Crusher threw herself into the turbolift closely followed by Counselor Troi.

As the turbolift picked up speed, Data's voice came over the comm once more. "Counselor, Doctor, the shuttle is now clearing shuttlebay 2... Shuttle now clear of the Enterprise."

"Action, Commander?" the Counselor snapped out instantly.

"Tractor beam activated by Worf in Engineering... Tractor beam successful, the shuttle has been secured to port of the Enterprise."

"Well done, Worf," breathed Beverly Crusher, before she raised her voice to address Data. "Are you going to beam the thief out of there, Data?"

"The next logical step *would* be to transport the shuttle occupant back onto the Enterprise."

"So someone should get to a transporter room," Beverly responded.

"Um... For 'someone', I think you mean us, Beverly," Deanna pointed out. "The next thing is for US to get to a transporter room."

"Agreed, Counselor," came Data's voice.

"Transporter Room 3," instructed Counselor Troi to the turbo-lift destination control before she added, "well, I was always assured that life in Starfleet would never be boring!"

They arrived in transporter room 3 to find an unconscious Ensign slumped behind the main operator console.

"Such devotion to duty," Dr Crusher observed as they speedily moved him to one side,

"and still found sleeping on the job."

"OK - we're ready now for the co-ordinates, Data," Troi called out, checking the transporter console as well as she was able. "Beverly, the phaser cache is over there..." She indicated the far side of the transporter room with her free hand.

"Co-ordinates for shuttlecraft pilot laid in and ready," replied Data calmly. "Energizing now... You may need to boost the signal from your control panel, Counselor."

"Thank you, Data," Deanna remarked, scanning the console. "I just hope I can remember how to do this."

Troi and Crusher looked towards the transporter pad as the transfer started, the transporter just whining its way up to full power when the air splitting sound of red alert wailed through the transporter room.

"Perimeter alert," came the computer warning within the facility. "Condition code red - warning - perimeter alert." And the transporter automatically cut out as the Enterprise shields went up as part of the alert response.

"Data?" Crusher hit her communicator. "What NOW, for heaven's sake?"

"A vessel has been positively identified at the edge of sensor range, Dr Crusher, and shields have been raised. As the vessel has not answered any of our hails, and we as yet have no visual on it, it would be inappropriate to lower the Enterprise shields at this time. Therefore the shuttlecraft can neither return to the Enterprise or have its occupant transported back to the ship."

"What is your next move going to be, Commander Data?" Troi asked the acting Captain.

"My next objective was to have been to hail the unauthorised pilot of the shuttle, and ascertain what he had hoped to gain from his act of theft."

"Could I respectfully suggest that you do not do that, Commander."

"Counselor?"

"Let him sweat, just a little... until the Doctor and I have had a chance to see if we can find any indicators as to what all this is about."

"Let him sweat?... Ah, a colloquialism, for them to exist in a state of anxiety, or, intransitive, to be terrified... suffering. 'Sweat it out', to endure a difficult experience to the end - "

"Data!" both Doctor and Counselor exclaimed in unison.

"And you think this will be of benefit to us, Counselor?"

"Yes, I do." Deanna was looking towards the ceiling, one hand upon the transporter console, her expression one of extreme, long suffering patience. "For all we know, Data, it's the emergence of the shuttlecraft that may have triggered the interest of the mystery vessel."

"Agreed. Then I will delay contacting the shuttle."

"Excellent, Commander." Deanna could not resist shaking her head in exasperation.

Counselor Troi and Dr Crusher moved together as they walked shoulder to shoulder towards the exit. "I wish I knew what exactly was going on here," Deanna muttered in frustration. "What's more, I never before realised how much background colour the Enterprise complement contributed to my waking hours. The ship feels very empty."

"There's nothing?" Dr Crusher followed her through the doorway from the transporter room. "Not even the emotions aroused through REM dream sleep?"

"No... not really."

"Hell, that is a cause for concern. Whatever has put them there has got them well under... I'd better let Selaar know," Dr Crusher observed, somewhat dubiously. "'Open-eyed conspiracy - his time doth take'."

"Well, with almost everyone's eyes closed, events do seem to have speeded up a bit," Deanna agreed with irony, "So now, what next? Do we join Data on the Bridge, or, as we were about to do prior to the rude interruption posed by the theft of the shuttlecraft, shall we endeavour to find out just exactly WHAT is going on?"

"Whatever it is, Deanna, a conspiracy, Syrene or otherwise, would seem to be the order of the day," Dr Crusher pointed out. "And like it or not, we should try to eliminate 32.5% of our suspects... We, Counselor Troi, are going to have

to confront the Syrene delegation."

As fate would have it, the Syrenusae found Troi and Crusher before the two Starfleet officers had been able to make it to either the Enterprise armoury or another one of the emergency phaser caches, leaving them with only one personal phaser between the two of them. The Counselor and Doctor came across a large group of Syrene heading for the Bridge, and upon seeing their purposeful attitude and general demeanour, Troi realised that Data's implied suggestion of phasers earlier was a wise one, and one they should have perhaps acted on with greater speed.

The group was headed by Thelxepia, her face schooled into a carefully neutral expression as she walked up to the Enterprise officers. On her left was Aglaopheme of Sterope, her face a furious mask, and to the Syrene Elders' right was Patricia Evans, whose features were a picture of abject misery and worry.

"Doctor Crusher - Counselor Troi. We need to speak with you." Thelxepia stated calmly, her poise and dignity showing her to be truly the statesman Starfleet considered her to be.

"Please, follow me." Deanna Troi led the way to the Conference Lounge on that level, which happened to be the most convenient facility of a size suitable for the numbers presently at hand. Discreetly she tapped her communicator to alert Commander Data to the meeting and once the Syrene had distributed themselves to their satisfaction, Deanna spoke.

"You said, Thelxepia, that you needed to speak with us."

"Indeed we do - "

But she was interrupted by Patricia Evans jumping to her feet. "Oh Deanna... Beverly, I am so sorry, the shuttlecraft... It's Lucy. Lucy is responsible for the theft of the shuttle."

"Lucy?" Beverly Crusher swallowed quickly in an effort to lose the shrill note that had sounded through her exclamation. "Your Lucy?"

"Lucy stole the shuttlecraft!" Deanna put a confused hand up to cover her eyes. "Patricia, WHY did Lucy steal the shuttlecraft, for heaven's sake?"

"Parthenope!" Agla's voice cut through

the tension in the room like a stiletto knife. "That is all they need to know. Must you insist on spilling our race's guts every time someone from this so called Federation asks you a question?"

Aglaopheme, by now, was also on her feet and, with one hand on her hip, was using the gestures of the other to emphasize her words.

"Whoa... Now hold on a moment, Madam." Dr Crusher stood also, not about to be intimidated yet again, by this particular member of the Syrene species. "That young lady has stolen Starfleet property, for what purpose we know not - and to be honest, at this precise moment I care not. What I do care about is that without her co-operation chances are that we will not get her back on board and if that means knowing WHY she was moved to do such a damn fool stunt... we want to know, and know now."

"Can you not simply beam the child back on board?" said a Syrene from the rear of the group, which Troi was pretty sure to be the notorious Molpe. "Surely the time for explanations can come later when the child is out of danger."

"I am sorry, but that is not possible."

"Hah... there you are, Parthenope. So much for your so-called sympathetic Federation. Oh, yes, but they are humane and humanitarian, but obviously only in the most Human sense of the words!"

"I beg your pardon!" Beverly Crusher responded icily, "but the reason we are unable to return Lucy to the ship is that a potentially hostile vessel has moved into the Enterprise's sensor range. we cannot drop the shields for an instant to reclaim either Lucy or the Shuttlecraft without putting the entire crew, and yourselves, at risk."

The Syrene went strangely still at the mention of another vessel.

"There is another ship? You are quite sure of this?" The voice was Pisinoe's, the tall Syrene having just entered the lounge via the far door in time to hear Doctor Crusher's explanation. Her voice the only sound in the otherwise deathly quiet of the room.

"Commander Data - have you been monitoring this conversation?" Deanna asked, raising the volume of her voice slightly.

"Indeed I have, Counselor," came the android officer's voice over her communicator. Both Counselor Troi and Dr Crusher ignored Agla's theatrical eye rolling at this particular revelation.

"Is anything more known about the vessel that triggered the Enterprise perimeter alert earlier, Commander?" Troi continued, a determined note in her voice. "You said before that it was not within visual range, and that it was refusing to answer any of our hails."

"That was true, Counselor, and the ship is still refusing to answer our repeated requests for it to identify itself. However the ship has now moved within visual range, and it is clearly of Ferengi configuration."

Counselor Deanna Troi would never have believed it if she had not actually seen it with her own eyes, but at the mention of the word 'Ferengi' the fearsome collection of Syrene, stoically silent a moment before, dissolved into a flutter of silent hand gestures. But the lack of words was not enough to elude the skills of Counselor Troi, who looked straight into Dr Crusher's clear questioning gaze and said, "Panic. Pure unadulterated panic. That is what I am sensing."

"Panic? But that would imply... fear, wouldn't it?" queried Dr Crusher, obviously somewhat confused by this. True enough, the Enterprise had had its brushes with the strange profit-seeking race, for the first time at Delphi Ardu, and then mostly on those occasions when Captain Picard's command had hosted important trade negotiations. As a race they were not accounted the reverence accorded to the Vulcans, or the grudging respect afforded to the Klingons. If anything, they were tolerated almost as a necessary irritation... but fear?

"What possible hold have the Ferengi got on the Syrene that could produce this kind of response, Deanna?" Beverly whispered to the Counselor at her side.

Deanna simply shrugged, her expression bewildered.

"It must be effective. Some of them are absolutely terrified of encountering the Ferengi... So this poses the question, in the face of this new finding, are the Syrene truly the most likely candidates to have reduced the ship to such a vulnerable state?"

"Unlikely," Beverly Crusher responded. "It also makes it unlikely that the stealing of the shuttlecraft has anything to do with this mystery Ferengi vessel. Having seen Lucy's race's reaction to the Ferengi, it is fair to assume that the last thing any one of them would do is contemplate leaving a nice safe starship in a tiny shuttle when there is a risk of interception by 'them'."

Deanna looked at Beverly, and then away toward the void of deep space beyond the plexisteel glass of the observation lounge port.

"Not necessarily."

"What do you mean, Counselor. 'Not necessarily'?"

"Lucy stole the shuttle."

"We all appear to be fairly unanimous on that point, Deanna."

"The Syrene reaction to the Ferengi is...?" Counselor Troi indicated that Dr Crusher should finish the sentence for her.

"Panic, fear... terror."

"The more normal Human reaction to the Ferengi is...?"

"Irritation, annoyance... occasionally contempt," answered Crusher, thinking of Picard.

"Lucy is Syrene. Agreed. But she has been brought up as if she is a Human child. As was Patricia. She has not been subjected to the same conditioning as the Syrene in this room now. I bet you that Lucy Evans is *not* terrified of the Ferengi. Furthermore, I'll lay you odds that that young lady knows far more about this than all of us in this room put together."

"Data." Dr Crusher tapped her communicator unobtrusively. "Is it possible for a link to be established with the shuttle?"

"Yes, Doctor. However, as has just been pointed out to me by Worf, due to the close proximity of the Ferengi vessel it may be advisable to code any transmissions between the Enterprise and shuttle, as we know from personal experience that the Ferengi can be somewhat unpredictable."

"Don't we just!" muttered Troi at Dr Crusher's side.

"I was lucky enough to miss the Hathaway incident the first time round - and I certainly have no wish to see a replay," Dr Crusher commented, "however thrilling Wes seemed to find it. Let us know when you have managed to initiate a suitably secure link, Commander."

"Of course, Doctor."

"Counselor Troi. Dr Crusher." Patricia Evans had left the main group of Syrene who were still in deep discussion. "You must get my daughter out of that shuttlecraft and safely back on board the Enterprise now!"

The Emissary's distress had been quickly tempered by her steely control, and the uncompromising note in her voice had Deanna Troi acting quickly to avert a situation.

"Emissary - Lucy stole the shuttlecraft. She put herself at risk. You cannot truly expect us to consider exposing the crew of the Enterprise and the Syrene delegation to potentially hostile forces without due consideration of all available options."

"There are no other options. Lucy must be brought back on board now."

"There are always other options, Emissary," Counselor Troi replied coolly to the Syrene woman, unconsciously resorting to one of Captain Picard's oft-used maxims, "but exactly what they are remain a mystery until we have been told the full story."

"You have been told as much as you need to know already," Agla answered for Patricia Evans, coming up to the small group by the observation lounge window, "if not too much."

Dr Crusher shook her head and looked at the distant starscape through the cold plexiteel before turning purposefully back towards the room to answer Agla.

"We need to know *why* Lucy has decided to put us all at risk, and just as importantly, *how*? Is Lucy responsible for the appearance of the Ferengi vessel? The information on this assimilation was restricted. Are they somehow responsible for this malaise that has struck down the Enterprise crew and effectively paralysed this Starship?"

"We do not know the answers to all your questions Doctor," Agla returned with the greatest civility she had yet accorded the CMO,

"and the answers we can give are too taboo. We will not - indeed cannot - discuss such subjects with non-race alien outsiders."

"Then how can we help, Agla? How do we know what to do?" Dr Crusher appealed to the aloof, reserved individual before her. "How do we know that the Syrene race has not got some weird form of initiation rites that include putting a Starship at risk?"

"I can personally assure you, Dr Crusher, that is not so," Agla responded, "and that is a quite ridiculous suggestion on your part!"

"But how do we know that it is not something equally as absurd? Now is not the time for secrecy, innuendo or coy games. At the moment, we are all vulnerable - whatever has happened to this starship has left us virtually at the mercy of the Ferengi vessel out there, and believe me, we are no more happy about it than you are. We are all in danger, be we Starfleet or Syrene. All of us. So let's deal in some basic facts, starting with why Lucy has been behaving so oddly on this journey - and ending with what has really brought you all together here. And my money is not on some dipsy Federation assimilation gambit," Dr Beverly Crusher finished firmly, her hands in the pocket of her med coat, her shrewd eyes scanning the assembled group of Syrenusae.

"If you want help, you are going to have to help us first," Counselor Troi pointed out gently, "and a good start may be for us to tell you that now would be a timely occasion to give us a clear, detailed explanation."

The two Starfleet officers waited patiently for an answer, until finally Deanna Troi said, "OK, so what if I told you that I, personally, have sensed a change in the general nature of the empathic 'noise' from your race since the appearance of the Ferengi vessel?"

Thelxepia looked at Agla with some surprise and no little disapproval. "You did not tell me, Aglaopheme, that the Counselor was an empath. That was a little remiss of you," she stated imperiously.

"You did not ask me, Elder Thelxepia," was Aglaopheme's cool yet simple response, "and it would really have made no difference to our dealings with the Federation, except certain of us -" she looked pointedly at Patricia Evans and then the aide Pisinoe - "insist on thinking with their mouths open."

"The Syrene way has always been to keep silent but be watchful," Molpe chimed in.

"Molpe, child, do not attempt to lecture me on the ways of our race," retorted Thelxepia, her sharp voice aimed at the young Syrene's presumption.

It was during this exchange that acting Captain, Commander Data, managed successfully to hail Counselor Troi and Dr Crusher, having eventually established a secure link to the shuttlecraft.

"Now that communications have been secured, a visual to the observation lounge can be made should you require it," Data informed them. "However there may be some disturbance due to the combined effects of tractor beam and extended shields on sub space."

As efficient and as helpful as ever, despite his additional, onerous duties as Captain in such an awkward situation. Counselor Troi made sure that she accorded him the proper respect in her reply, "Okay. Let's do it, Data."

She spun quickly on her heel, turning to address the assembled Syrene who had been listening closely to Agla's continuing arguments.

"Is it wise to give them a visual of Lucy, Deanna?" Beverly Crusher questioned. "I am sure I have no need to tell you of the state of nervous anxiety they are in at the moment."

"But they do not appear anxious enough to help us," Deanna pointed out with her customary acuteness. "Maybe they need an illustration as to exactly how vulnerable we all are at present."

"That's emotional blackmail, Counselor."

"No, Doctor, that is psychology - and our badly needed edge."

Troi raised her voice to address the Syrene assimilates. "We have managed to establish contact with the shuttle, and we have visual now, Commander Data, at your convenience."

The viewscreen at one end of the lounge flickered into life, to show Lucy Evans sitting mutinously in the cockpit of the shuttle, her arms crossed and, although pale, her face ferociously defiant. The image suffered a little from sub-space distortion, which added to the overall effect quite considerably.

"Lucy!" Patricia gasped, going so pale that Dr. Crusher made to move towards her, convinced that the Emissary was about to pass out. "Lucy - why do this? Why do this to us... to me? Oh my -"

"I am all right, mother... I am fine. Do not worry," Lucy said with rebellious irritation.

"Do not worry. *Do not worry!*" The Emissary's face moved from patent fear to clear anger within the space of seconds. "Have you any concept of the danger your action has put us all in?"

"I had to do it, Mother, can't you see that? Have you all lost it - I cannot believe that you are about to stand idly by whilst a mere child is sacrificed in the wake of your indecision!"

"Be silent, Leucosia!" Agla snapped angrily, her voice loud.

"I will not, Aglaopheme - and you a so-called Syrene Guardian. I thought you, of all our race, would understand. You were there when Marta Lean was taken from us, you were there the last time Marta Lean was seen alive. I thought that would fire you with the passion for justice, for revenge, to do something... But you are just like all the rest. A hypocritical coward!"

"Leucosia! Enough!" Thelxepia's tone was curt.

"They would not listen to me, Elder Thelxepia. I tried to tell them about the Syrene loopback - that she was at risk, in danger - before she was even stolen from her homeworld. But no. They told me I was just a child. That I did not understand. But I do! They hesitated, whereas the Ferengi did not!"

There was a sudden outbreak of agitated noise from the group within the observation lounge at this.

"Quiet... Quiet, please... I said QUIET!" Deanna bellowed uncharacteristically before hitting the observation lounge table with her fist to emphasize her words. "QUIET!"

Finally silence fell, all eyes upon the Counselor.

"Now, Patricia - what is this about a child?"

Patricia looked straight at the ship's

Counselor, ignoring Aglaopheme's furious curses and the fact that the leader of the House of Sterope had started to pace the length of the lounge in jerky, angry movements.

"Lucy had apparently successfully located a young Syrene loopback, or rogue, in the possession of a notorious Ferengi trader. Somehow my daughter, through her rather ...unfortunate associations on our homeworld, managed to get news of this child even before the Ferengi had time to act on their information."

Patricia Evans paused awkwardly, as if uncertain how much more to impart with the other Syrene there to watch, before she took a deep breath and continued. "The Ferengi, or rather this particular Ferengi, Dado, is acting as agent for someone we know only as BeAn. BeAn has become something of a feared spectre of our race in recent years, most particularly since the name was linked with the loss of one of the Syrene Guardians - Marta Lean."

There were many respectful downcast glances and some foot shuffling at the mention of this name, but the room was now blanketed in a deathly hush that made Deanna Troi feel as if she was shouting at the top of her voice when she asked at her normal soft volume, "And you have no idea who this BeAn is, his race, who he... or she... it... is working for, what they are trying to achieve by this?"

"What I want to know," stated Beverly Crusher, one hand on the table, "is what the hell do the Ferengi think they are doing making a profit out of trading in children?"

"We have not got conclusive proof of that... yet," the Emissary pointed out, her voice carefully monotone.

"Proof? Is not a suspicion bad enough?" asked Beverly Crusher, clearly appalled. "This is a child, for heaven's sake. What does BeAn want so badly with a child that he, or indeed she, is prepared to fuel the greed of the Ferengi sufficiently for them to risk the ire of the Federation?"

"If this is true, it certainly contradicts Federation laws at the most basic of levels," agreed Counselor Troi, "particularly when referring to a preferred Federation trading race such as the Ferengi."

"They must feel they have a lot to profit by it," commented Dr Crusher caustically, cutting

straight to the heart of the matter, "Maybe more than any of us are aware of."

"That is possible," Deanna agreed.

There was a silent pause, the only noise being the static interference audible via the viewscreen, all present appearing lost in their own thoughts - save one.

"Please sit."

The voice, crisp and controlled, came from Thelxepia, who was standing at the head of the main conference table in the lounge and indicating its chairs with one slender, outstretched hand.

"Elder!" Agla had obviously realised something that no one else had about the leader's demeanour.

"Aglaopheme... there is a time to speak, and a time to be silent. Our silence has stood us in good stead for a long, long time... but times change. Maybe Leucusia is right, and the onus is on us to change with them. Just because things have worked in the past does not guarantee those methods in the future."

"I disagree. I disagree, Elder. If our race had kept its secrets a little better, the problems of now would never have arisen!" Agla argued hotly.

"But it is a secret now that is whispered everywhere," Thelxepia pointed out to her fellow gently. "It is to some a knowledge they cannot, indeed, will not lose. Now is not the time to be quite so silent. So sit with us, Aglaopheme of Sterope, please."

Aglaopheme of Sterope looked from Thelxepia, to Patricia Evans, to Molpe, to Pisinoe and then back to Thelxepia of Achelous again, before throwing herself into one of the chairs with a most unrefined grunt of protest.

Slowly, Thelxepia arranged herself on the chair at the head, and then Patricia sat also, followed by Counselor Troi and Dr Crusher; then Pisinoe and Molpe, as one by one those present appeared to take up the unspoken challenge to co-operate against a common enemy. Those Syrene who could not sit at the table clustered about Thelxepia at the head, as slowly the Syrene leader regarded the assembled members of her race before turning her attention to Counselor and Doctor.

"I suppose Commander Data is still 'monitoring' us?" Agla enquired with acid tones of resignation.

"In our present situation, anything of importance said should be heard by our acting Captain," Counselor Troi insisted firmly.

"Do you have a problem with that, Aglaopheme?" Pisinoe's voice was steely soft.

Aglaopheme held the other woman's gaze for several moments before finally saying, "If Thelxepia is in agreement... no."

"Then we shall commence," Thelxepia instructed them. "I think you should be the one to start, Parthenope... as UFP Emissary, after all."

"Certainly, Elder."

Patricia turned in her seat to regard the two Starfleet officers present.

"You both know already that our race is somewhat unusual. Our longevity, our exclusivity of gender is, I know, now familiar to you. The Syrenusae have always maintained a strict code of secrecy about our race and culture, hence those taboo things. Physiology, cultural ceremonies, psychology... The list is endless. It has been our saviour, and our curse. That no medical knowledge of our race is available means that true Syrene infants still die of our race's version of the common cold. But it has offered invaluable protection for eons - purposely unbroken until the commencement of this assimilation project.

"Some within the Syrene race realised that the ways of the Syrenusae may well have to change, and they were the ones that called this Yrice and encouraged Federation involvement - hence here I am, as UFP Emissary."

It was Pisinoe who spoke up next.

"In looking to the future, it was felt that our race needed protection and acceptance, in order to flourish and grow. We have until now merely survived." Pisinoe scratched her head before adding, "Just about. Lucy had done very well in tracing the Syrene rogue, her detective work was indeed worthy of a true Guardian. But we were in fact already aware of the child's distress..."

"The empathic blips," Deanna said quietly.

"Quite right, Counselor," Pisinoe agreed a little awkwardly.

"Can I ask for a little clarification here," asked Dr Crusher, moving to place her arms on the table. "This Syrene rogue - or loopback. It is a full Syrenusae female child?"

"Indeed! And remember, Doctor - all Syrenusae are female."

"My apologies. So where is the Syrene mother?" Then Dr Crusher's face became intrigued. "Or is that where the term 'loopback' comes in... a form of genetic throwback to a previous generation, or more? How fascinating. In the days before full genetic mapping, it was possible for hereditary Human diseases such as phenylketonuria or Cooley's Anaemia to remain in generations of a family, emerging only when marriage occurred to another family carrying a similar hidden genetic trait." Dr Crusher looked at Counselor Troi whilst she said this. "But for the same thing to happen to a family, and for the child of a completely different race to emerge - it could be traumatic... for everyone concerned."

"So that makes the empathic links a very important factor for these isolated members of your race," Deanna observed.

"It is our way of tracking lost race members," agreed Pisinoe. "Effective and unstoppable. The capability, the effect, does dim with age or with learned discipline - leaving the way clear for those calls yet to come."

"So where does BeAn figure in all this?" Dr Crusher asked.

There was something of a silence before, hesitantly, Patricia Evans spoke, glancing first at the faces of those Syrene assembled at the table before she replied.

"The nature of Syrenusae reproduction means that reproductive cell chemistry shows an abnormally high toleration towards alien DNA, or indeed any compatible protein-based genetic code. Syrenusae have successfully mothered a wide variety of humanoid species over the ages without either the genetic intervention or vector manipulation more usually required."

"Soft DNA!" murmured Dr Crusher, almost to herself. "An ideal basis for genetic alteration and selective breeding." The CMO paused before continuing, a frown upon her face. "And it is this that the mysterious BeAn is hoping

to gain by capturing members of your race? It does seem a little strange, with all due respect, that all this trouble has been gone to for little more than could have been achieved by a team of average to good genetic engineers?"

"It would indeed, if that were all that was to be gained," answered Patricia.

"There is more?"

"Indeed. It is the confirmed suspicion of the Guardians that BeAn is really after the physiological secret of the Syrene ability to inherit actual knowledge from their parent's cell chemistry."

There was a pause of some length in the proceedings.

"You are saying that is possible?" Beverly Crusher managed after something of a stupefied silence. "How... can... that be so? That is learned knowledge, as distinct from intelligence."

Deanna Troi shrugged, at a loss, as the Doctor looked to her.

"You are saying that you can inherit knowledge - learned behaviour and information?"

"If that concept requires proof Dr Crusher, may I be so bold as to suggest the Enterprise itself is proof of that," Pisinoe suggested helpfully.

"The Enterprise? But the ship itself is fine... it is just the crew who are incapacitated."

The sound of the Communicator's hail startled everybody, and it was patently obvious that the Syrene delegation had completely forgotten the remote presence of Commander Data monitoring the conversation.

This reminder seemed to cause great discomfort.

"Dr Crusher, I would remind you that with respect to the Syrene claim, Lucy Evans' father was the foremost expert in control interaction within Starclass vessel computer systems. Someone with that level of expertise would have the ability to elude even my investigative abilities should they have access to the Enterprise computer."

"But Data... this has not manifested itself as a problem with the computer system, but with the crew," Counselor Troi pointed out.

"True - but what about a computer system that the crew could not live without?" Crusher asked, suddenly up to speed. "Something that they use without question for their every metabolic need... What about a problem with the replicator system?"

She immediately hit her communicator. "Dr Selaar, can I suggest you run an immediate analysis of a sample of water taken from the ship's replicators. If it proves more than just simply H₂O, we could finally have the answer to our strange malady..."

"I think our best solution is to negotiate directly with the Ferengi," the Chief Medical Officer pointed out. "We should let them know exactly who and what they are dealing with and let them decide if it is worth getting difficult."

"Doctor, it may be worth bearing in mind that Starfleet endorses an approach of negotiation rather than confrontation in all such situations," Data answered, in his pleasant, neutral voice. "The Enterprise, at present, is inadequately prepared should the Ferengi decide to prove awkward."

"But Data, you cannot be rationally considering negotiation with a kidnapper, a slave trader! To negotiate with such an individual is... At this point words failed the Doctor and she let her hands drop to her sides.

"Dr Crusher, as I am an android, everything I consider must be done rationally. It is after all, part of my programming."

"I give up." Beverly Crusher picked up her medical equipment and headed across the Bridge to the Captain's Ready Room. "I give up! If you need me, I'll be doing what I'm best at... Looking after sick people."

As the CMO stalked across the bridge area, Counselor Troi sighed.

"Dr Crusher has a valid point, Commander. It may be easier to deal with the Ferengi from a position of strength, rather than risk a negotiation that could reveal the extent of our vulnerability at this time."

The Counselor looked with some assurance at the acting Captain. "Until such a point as a practical solution to reversing the effects of the replicator contamination has been

found, with the crew completely incapacitated, even evacuation to the saucer section is a non-option.

"I say play for time, Commander."

Data regarded the Counselor steadily, his intelligent gaze from his curious gold eyes clearly reflecting his internal processing of the assessment that had been presented to him.

A deep voice hailed them over the communicators.

"Worf to bridge. Commander, we are preparing to reprogramme the replicator control systems from protected core back ups, on your signal."

Data sat in the Captain's chair, as if the commanding piece of bridge furniture would aid him in the difficult decisions he was going to have to make over the next few hours.

"Bridge to Dr Selaar. Doctor, have you collected your required spread of test samples from the replicators?"

"Yes, Commander, commencing analysis now."

"Excellent. Then, Mr Worf, you may proceed with the reprogramming of the ship's replicator system."

"How long will it take, Data?" Deanna Troi asked her bridge colleague as she sank slowly into the chair she more normally occupied to the left of Captain Picard.

"Due to the intricate and complex nature of replicator systems aboard Galaxy Class Starships, it will take exactly 35.7 minutes to reprogramme the base from memory. The next priority will be to implement the customised medical database and associated peripheral systems, which will take an additional 30.01 minutes."

"Data - that is over an hour, and we have not even got that!" Deanna murmured, her voice quietly shocked at this revelation.

"That also does not include the remaining non-standard control software, Counselor."

"Data, we are going to have to buy ourselves some extra time, and if that means negotiating with the Ferengi - then it may be our only option if we are to get this crew back onto

their feet again."

From the rear of the bridge, a silent onlooker broke into a disgusted snort. "Preposterous suggestion." Thelxepia strode forward, advancing on the two Starfleet officers in the centre of the main bridge area. "Look at the size of the Ferengi vessel. Its firepower and strength matches the Enterprise phaser for phaser, and its crew is not spread over its floors like some bad joke!"

The Syrene Elder turned to face them from her position next to the Vulcan Ensign Sudak, who was at Conn, calmly keeping the Enterprise on her slowed but steady course.

"Remember - we have dealt with this Ferengi 'gentleman' before, and the first rule is that he is no gentleman." Her tones were heavy with irony. "If he suspects ANYTHING of what the situation is aboard this ship, he will march in and claim the Enterprise, no doubt under the heading of 'fairly captured spoils of non-conflict situation'."

"He is that bold?"

"He is that greedy," the Syrene woman said distastefully. "Dado is excessively presumptive and greedy... even by Ferengi standards. It is that, and his far reaching influence within Ferengi worlds, that has allowed him certain 'freedoms' in the nature of his trade."

"I see." Counselor Troi contemplated the words with no little care. "Is there anything else of Dado's character that you think may be worth taking into consideration - anything at all, Elder?"

"He is incredibly suspicious, distrustful to the point of paranoia and predictable in all things bad, including his greed. He will not use transporters; he always insists that business deals be negotiated aboard his own ship. Dado also has a very inflated sense of his own importance."

"You seem to have a good knowledge of him," Troi observed

"Know thine enemy better than you would a friend, Counselor," Thelxepia replied sagely. "Better then to take care of them."

Counselor Troi intuitively knew that Thelxepia's words were born of experience, and turning thoughtfully about, she asked, "Has Lucy attempted to communicate with the Ferengi vessel yet?"

"Affirmative, Counselor, Lucy attempted to hail the Ferengi vessel several times prior to our success at establishing a secure link with the shuttlecraft," Data answered.

"The child is wasting her time anyhow. It is doubtful that Dado would deign to answer. Normal protocol is that Dado himself always initiates first contact."

"Intriguing," observed the acting Captain of the USS Enterprise.

"No. Predictable." Thelixepia smiled at the android officer, her tone almost edged with indulgence. "Dado deals only with leaders, commanding officers. His consequence demands nothing less than the 'top dog'. He certainly would NOT negotiate with a child, and a female child at that!"

Counselor Troi speedily raised her next point before Data could be distracted by the concept of the Ferengi deferring to some form of Terran canine.

"Which, in itself, poses us with another awkward problem, Elder Thelixepia," Troi said, with an unhappy glance towards the Captain's Ready Room. "The events of the past 24 hours have left our most senior officers somewhat indisposed, the command structure having badly ravaged by the replicator incident. Should the Ferengi Daimon wish to speak with Captain Picard, it could prove somewhat difficult to explain without raising suspicions."

"As acting Captain, Counselor, I would be the Daimon's logical choice for negotiation," Data pointed out.

"And as ship's Counselor, Data, I would be forced to point out that, as Captain, it would be ill advised for you to leave the Enterprise. That would be under more normal conditions. With the present crisis, it is imperative that you do not leave this ship!"

"Understood, Counselor," Data acknowledged.

"It surely cannot be long before Dado remembers his own rules and contacts us. The Ferengi would have been blind not to have noticed the shuttlecraft by now," Deanna mused.

"Not necessarily," Data pointed out. "Mooring the shuttlecraft to our ship, prior to

using it as an auxiliary vessel in hostile negotiations, would be sensible practice. As we have extended the shields to include the shuttle, we now only have to drop them long enough to transport negotiation personnel, as opposed to the time required to pilot the shuttle physically out of the shuttlebay and clear enough of the Enterprise itself before shields could be re-established.

"Okay," said Troi, her voice indicating that she might have found herself a small germ of an idea. "So the next person to convince should be Lucy Evans."

"Counselor? The reliability of Lucy Evans is open to some question."

"We have no option, Data. Lucy knows what the Ferengi expect. Lucy knows what she intended to do next. For my money, we need Lucy on OUR side."

Dr Beverly Crusher strode out from the Captain's Ready Room having checked the life signs of Captain Jean-Luc Picard and Commander William T Riker. She looked at the assembled group of Patricia Evans, Deanna Troi, Data and Thelixepia as the doors swished shut behind her.

"Sleeping like babies, the pair of them," she said to no one in particular, "but I hope I am not within 100 parsecs of either of them when this thing wears off! Dr Selaar, how is the analysis going?"

"Well, Dr Crusher, I should have some useful results within half an hour."

"Great. Lucy?" Dr Crusher suddenly became aware of the silence on the Bridge, and the fact that the young Syrene was on the main viewscreen. Her voice became grave as she asked, "Lucy - is everything all right?"

"Oh, Doctor, I am so sorry! This has all gone too far. I didn't expect the replicator control virus to sweep through the system so quickly - I only wanted to weaken the ship sufficiently enough to persuade the Captain to act or for the Syrene to seize the opportunity to persuade Captain Picard to do something. But all I've done is put us all at Dado's mercy. Thelixepia... The Syrene Guardians... When I realized, I stole the shuttlecraft to act as a decoy. I thought I could lure him away..." Her mouth trembled as she stumbled bravely on, "But you must understand,

I had to do something. I could not stand by... idle."

"I know. I understand, truly I do," Dr Crusher reassured her, throwing a curious look at Data and Counselor Troi, "and I am sure Captain Picard will do his best too, particularly if you are instrumental in helping the Enterprise get back to strength. Just do not upset yourself. The most important thing is to get you back aboard the Enterprise."

"I just wanted you to know before you do, what you have to do."

Dr Beverly Crusher's poise rarely slipped sufficiently for her to look taken aback, but she was looking pretty taken aback now.

"What am I - we - about to do?" The CMO addressed the enquiry to the whole Bridge, her voice deceptively soft. "Come on. Is someone going to tell me, or am I going to have to force it out of one of you?"

"Beverly, we need to act quickly to allay any Ferengi suspicion about the Enterprise. We need to leave this ship out of any equation until it is in a fit state to be useful."

"Agreed," Dr Crusher replied, surprised at their reticence at voicing what must surely be obvious.

The Ferengi Daimon is expecting a Federation negotiation team to bid for the Syrene loopback. That's how Lucy persuaded him to rendezvous here with the child on board his vessel - hence the subtle change in the empathic 'noise' I have been aware of since the appearance of the Ferengi vessel."

"But it is against Federation regulations to indulge in such negotiation, Counselor," Beverly Crusher pointed out with unrelenting logic. "There are two ways of looking at the Daimon's actions, hostage taking or slavery... neither permissible, and not to be compounded by our encouragement either - and the rules say so clearly!"

"Beverly, if we delay any longer, Daimon Dado will probably annex the Enterprise and reduce us all to either slave or hostage!" Counselor Troi replied forcefully. "We need to act now - right this minute."

"All right, so what is your plan?" Dr Crusher asked, perching on the edge of the Ops

console, her face that of one who would need no little convincing.

"Thelxepia has assured us of the need to convince Daimon Dado he is dealing with the Commander of this starship, so we will dispatch a negotiation team of three to the Ferengi vessel to keep Dado busy whilst the replicators are fully reinitialized and the effects on the crew, hopefully, reversed."

"That sounds sensible... but can the Enterprise really spare Worf and Data at the present time? No - of course it can't. Data is acting Captain, and with the present crisis, Worf is more vital aboard this ship than ever. OK, so I have answered my own question."

The Chief Medical Officer put one hand on her hip and looked hard at her colleagues. "So who exactly is going over to sweet talk this Ferengi monster? The Syrene are hardly eligible - we can hardly risk civilians in such a situation."

"I can go. As Emissary for the UFP, I think it is important that I am there, and although my appearance is ostensibly Syrene, I think that Dado would be fooled by my eyes and by a borrowed uniform," Patricia Evans replied calmly, her voice cautious.

"Counselor?"

"I am an obvious choice, Beverly; my place in any such negotiation would be at my commanding officer's side - and I think that is where I will be most effective in this charade," Deanna replied with some resignation. "There is more at stake in these negotiations than one Syrene life - as if that were not enough, the whole of the Enterprise could be at risk also. It is my duty to go."

"That leaves a commanding officer vacancy," Dr Crusher observed, then as she looked from one face to the next of the people on the Bridge, realization dawned. "So I'm to be commanding officer for this Away Team," she said slowly, then she shrugged. "OK, no problem. As Chief Medical Officer, I am clearly -"

But the Counselor was shaking her head, Data watching the two officers' discussion with the attitude of an avid spectator.

"No?" Dr Beverly Crusher frowned, trying to divine the Counselor's meaning. "Well, of course, I would be far better employed in sickbay

with Dr Selaar, getting the crew back on its feet. Should you - "

"No, Doctor. I respectfully suggest that Daimon Dado will not be satisfied with 'just' the CMO, and should we attempt to approach him with you leading the Away Team in your present capacity, it would in fact probably initiate just the kind of questions being asked that we must avoid."

"Then what are you suggesting? And would you all stop being so damned cryptic!" Beverly responded with some irritation.

"I think the Counselor is implying that something more may be required of our prospective ruse."

"Ruse, Data?"

"Indeed. A ruse - a stratagem, feint or trick," replied Data with no little enthusiasm. "We need to dispatch what is apparently a full complement to the Ferengi ship - and to allay any suspicion of our present incapacitation."

"Data! ...I would appreciate less commentary and more specifics. I have actually managed to grasp that much!" the Doctor snapped. "You do all keep implying that time is of the essence."

"Indeed. Under more normal circumstances, the Away Team in this situation would be led, in all probability - or, more specifically, with a likelihood of 82.5%, by Captain Picard himself."

Doctor Crusher's eyes opened wide, and then narrowed in disbelief. "You can't mean... You surely cannot mean that I should pose as..." Beverly covered her eyes and groaned long and hard before saying one phrase that was getting a good airing this trip.

"Oh, Hell!" Dr Beverly Crusher bit out grimly.

SIX

Captain's Log, Stardate 50413.8 Acting Captain Lt Commander Data recording.

We have suspended all communication with Starfleet that might betray our vulnerability to the Ferengi, assuming

the Ferengi may well monitor those channels left unsecured. Work proceeds with the reinitialisation of the replicator systems, but additional problems have left us with little option other than to dispatch Dr Crusher, Counselor Troi and Emissary Evans for the 'negotiations' with Ferengi Daimon, Dado. As the Enterprise is now almost stationary close to the Gamma-5 Dorsan Dwarf Star System, our proximity to the edge of the neutral zone is now also becoming a matter for some concern.

"You may well frown, but I am NOT leaving this behind!" Dr Crusher responded adamantly, as she struggled to untwist the shoulder strap of her medical bag. "If it makes you any happier, Deanna can carry it for me. A bag carrier is, after all, a Captain's perk." She hefted her bag from shoulder to shoulder.

Emissary Evans and Dr Crusher were not wasting time with tardy progress as they marched speedily to their rendezvous with Deanna Troi in transporter room one.

"You must be careful, Beverly," Patricia warned her. "Thelxepia has briefed me fully on Dado, and it would not do to underestimate him. Even the smallest mistake could betray us. We must be vigilant at all times, according to the Elder."

"I have to hand it to Thelxepia of Achelous," Crusher said, finally managing to slip her medical equipment neatly onto her shoulder. "I had my doubts about Syrene Elder Thelxepia agreeing with your aims for the race she represents, as she does not volunteer overmuch information. But when she decides to do something, it is not done by halves."

"It is the Syrenusae way not to 'volunteer' information, after all, Dr Crusher. We are a race with much in our past that it might be wiser not to volunteer at all," Patricia answered apologetically, fingering the high collar of her borrowed uniform as if it was suddenly a little tight about her throat.

"Is that why very little information has been volunteered about Marta Lean? I have heard the name several times now, and it works as a marvellous, surefire conversation killer amongst your race, Patricia."

"Habit." Patricia smiled wearily. "And

maybe a little pain. Janet Lean was Thelxepia of Achelous' stepdaughter, of all things, a Human brought up to be Syrene by the Elder, when their family was killed in a bloody raid on a distant colony world. A Human who embraced the Syrene culture to such an extent that she was far more Syrene than I will ever be... a Syrene Guardian of great sight and commitment, the like of which we will be lucky to see again."

"What happened to her, Patricia?" Beverly frowned, touched by the depth of regret in the Emissary's voice.

"She and a Syrene rogue were trapped by that meat merchant Dado, and Marta Lean struck a bargain with the Ferengi jackal... apparently they approved of the deal. The rogue was returned to us, but Janet was 'bought' by a genetic physiologist, we later learned, of the name BeAn. She was dead within four weeks, but the almighty taboo of the Syrene race was intact. It was a tragic and unnecessary loss."

"It is 'martyr' Lean then, in honour of her sacrifice!" Beverly clarified in a shocked voice.

And Patricia looked hard at the Doctor's face before adding, "That is why Aglaopheme and myself have few words in common, Dr Crusher. Agla had been with Janet on the quest to track the Syrene child down - it always seemed a little strange that it was poor Janet Lean who had to pay the ultimate price for one of our race to survive. No life, whatever the species, should be held cheaper than any other."

"What could a genetic physiologist like BeAn be trying to achieve through work that demands a price as high as the life of his study subjects?"

"The secret of a 300 year life span, maybe. The key to inherited learned knowledge. The clues of long distance telepathic ability. Same questions as you have, Doctor, just very different methods."

Dr Crusher paused for a moment to look at the UFP Emissary. "I would hope that I could take such a philosophical attitude if I was in your position, Emissary."

"Here is hoping that you never have to find out, Doctor," Patricia replied as she led the way into the transporter room.

Counselor Troi was standing patiently with Worf by the transporter console, looking

unfamiliar in a blue uniform that Dr Crusher had forgotten Deanna even possessed.

"Lordy, Counselor Troi, are we looking to blind the Ferengi with our command insignia?" Beverly Crusher observed with dry humour.

"I thought, as Dado is by all account very rank conscious, we should do our best to impress upon him our... importance," she replied succinctly, before adding, her tongue firmly in her cheek, "Captain."

Beverly eyed her colleague somewhat ferociously from under her drawn eyebrows. "Now don't you start. It's bad enough that I have been drawn into this hare-brained scheme at all - then I find out that because the replicators are down, we will have to borrow the uniforms. Okay for Ensign Evans here, the worst person she will have to deal with is Ms Lopez. I, however, am doomed to a messy end either way - if not at the hands of the Ferengi, then at the hands of our esteemed Captain, when he finds out I have been impersonating a Starfleet superior."

"I agree, Doctor," Worf boomed out from the control console as Deanna did her best not to roll her eyes in exasperation.

"Is Engineering secure now, Worf?" Deanna asked the Klingon innocently.

"No, not really. But I feel I should attend to make clear my disapproval of this proposed deceit. It is not honourable."

"Stuff honour," came Thelxepia's voice from the transporter room doors as she, accompanied by Guinan, entered. "As long as it is effective, who cares?"

Worf allowed himself a low menacing growl at the Syrene Elder, who regarded him with indisputable Syrene contempt, before he continued in his clipped official tones. "Then I shall say nothing more except to log my... disagreement, and ask the Away Team - have you phasers and homing devices as I instructed?"

"Yes, Worf," Deanna replied, relieving Beverly Crusher of the med bag as the Doctor stepped forward to accept a phaser from the security chief.

"You know the first thing those grubby Ferengi are going to do when we finally get off that shuttlecraft is search us thoroughly for these," Beverly grumbled.

"Then hide them!" Worf snapped on a low note, his misgivings about the whole charade obvious.

"Commander Data," Dr Crusher hailed the real acting Captain as she prepared to be transported to the shuttle, "have you an update on the status of the ship's crew? Last time I checked, Dr Selaar had successfully isolated a compound common to all media of replicator generated sustenance."

"Yes, Dr Crusher. Dr Selaar has since reported that she has identified the compound as a so called 'creeping drug' known to cause general anaesthesia if ingested, similar in composition, and in high enough concentrations as fatal as certain hypnogenetic narcotic substances used in the 22nd and 23rd centuries."

"Good God! And an antidote?"

"Dr Selaar has indicated she is going to follow your advice on the approach to an antidote, and is preparing a broad based treatment which will be dispensed to reverse the effects of this contamination, once the replicators are back up. It will not be until that point in the ship's recovery plan, that adequate supplies of antidote can be produced."

"Aim to treat key members of the crew first, Data. We are lucky that Lucy's blind ignorance has not caused fatalities!" Crusher indicated the transporter platform and mounted it first, closely followed by Evans and Troi.

"I really wish I had more time to discuss this, Data - but I suppose we had better go."

"To minimise exposure, Lucy Evans will be beamed back as you are transported out. Thus we need to drop the shields only once."

"Understood, Mr Worf. Mr Data, if anything should happen over the next few hours that puts the Enterprise at risk, I would remind you that Captain Picard is relying on you to get this crew home."

"Understood, Doctor," both Klingon and android answered.

"Well, to the negotiation - as has been said in the past," said the Doctor, her voice fading as the transporter beam slowly dissolved her form for travel. "Fighting is essentially a masculine idea. A woman's weapon is her tongue..."

And the blue transporter beam enveloped the three figures on the transporter pad and replaced it with a single lone figure, whose shoulders were slumped as if in defeat.

"Now then, child," Thelxepia said bracingly, "less of the long face. You have got a lot of work to do to atone for your misbehaviour. And while you are busy with that, I suggest you start work on your explanation of your actions to our host, Captain Picard, who I think will be most interested to hear of your activities when he wakes up - finally."

Evans slipped into position at the shuttlecraft conn and checked the controls swiftly with an expertise that belied her years away from such technology.

"Shuttlecraft Tiberius to Enterprise, ready to commence manual control at your discretion," Evans reported coolly. "Entering course co-ordinates for the Ferengi vessel now."

"Tractor beam terminated. Shields withdrawn. Shuttle Tiberius, you are now clear for independent manoeuvre," came Data's voice by way of a reply.

"Thank you, Enterprise," Evans responded. "Engaging thrusters now."

Deanna Troi moved to stand next to Beverly Crusher as she watched the shuttle move away from its present position close to the hull's comforting presence. "You are nervous." Only the half-Betazoid empath could make such a statement and sound so convinced.

"You bet I am, Deanna - and that is putting it rather mildly, Counselor!"

"I know... I was being polite," Deanna turned her back on the starscape ahead of the shuttle and looked sideways at Dr Crusher. "It will be interesting to see how the Ferengi Daimon will cope with a negotiating team that is all female. It could give us an advantage - if I remember correctly, the Ferengi are very ill at ease with the concept of liberated women."

"Well, as long as they don't decide to un-liberate us by clapping us in the Ferengi version of the brig, I'll take whatever advantage comes our way!" responded Beverly with conviction.

"Incoming message, Captain," Evans

reported, obviously becoming more involved with her role by the moment. "We are being hailed by the Ferengi vessel, Oumoc II, commanding officer, Daimon Dado."

Crusher exchanged glances with Deanna Troi before putting her chin up and tugging at her unfamiliar red command uniform top in a movement that was a clear emulation of Picard. "It would appear it is time to pray to God and say the lines."

"Pardon? I did not catch your answer Captain," Evans replied.

"On screen, Ensign," Crusher replied promptly.

The viewscreen flickered into life, revealing Dado sitting in his command chair, an air of almost smug superiority originating from him in waves. His immediate words were, "Greetings representatives of the United Federation of Planets..."

And there his words stopped as Daimon Dado realised that ALL three were females of the Human species.

"What is this! Do you seek to insult the legendary Daimon of the Oumoc II by sending an all...female - " the words were not comfortable in his mouth - "delegation to negotiate aboard MY ship!"

"Daimon Dado - I am the Captain of the USS Enterprise," Beverly lied smoothly, with only the smallest of pauses. "It was assumed that you would wish to negotiate with someone of similar... standing to yourself, on this matter."

"You are not Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise, therefore already you are less than equal to myself. And why am I not to negotiate with the great Picard himself?"

"I am Captain Beverly Crusher, commanding officer of the USS Enterprise and representative of Starfleet Command. That is all you need to know for our negotiations to proceed," Beverly stonewalled him, her jaw firm. The best way to avoid his questions was simply not to answer them, and so Captain Crusher put on her best imitation of Will Riker's poker face and stood facing the viewscreen, feet slightly apart, hands clasped behind her back.

The Ferengi Daimon stared back at her, his small beady eyes taking her measure with the

intensity born of greed. He badly wanted to negotiate with them, or he was at least prepared to discuss terms, Crusher realised, and that alone could prove sufficient to blind this Ferengi opportunist to the state of the Enterprise itself.

"A woman in charge of the Enterprise? Perhaps the Oumoc has been away for too long." There was still a note of sneering distrust present in his oily tones. "An honour, a vote of confidence indeed to be given such a prestigious command. I am prepared to proceed with the negotiations."

Beverly slowly released her breath, and glanced quickly at Troi. "Then we will dock our shuttlecraft with the Oumoc II with all possible haste, and commence our meeting within the hour - but first of all, we will see the child."

"Suspicious of trickery, Captain?" The hissing Ferengi voice of Dado mocked her.

"No - just cautious, Daimon Dado," Beverly responded unequivocably. "The child, please."

The Ferengi commanding officer had obviously been expecting some request of this kind, for he turned and gesticulated abruptly at someone beyond the scope of the viewscreen. "Bring it here," he growled.

A small wretch was hustled into view, surely no more than the equivalent 8 or 9 years of a Human child, in Beverly Crusher's estimation. Deanna Troi's gasp at her shoulder told her more about the child's mental condition than was perhaps conducive to the game of bluff and double bluff they were presently involved in.

"Audio transmission muted," Evans reported, her fingers scattering over the controls which would allow them a few moments privacy.

"I feel fear, terror... confusion," Deanna reported quickly, "and a definite empathic presence, although not quite as consistent as that present in other members of the Syrene race I have encountered."

"That is not unusual in a loopback," Patricia reassured her, "but if anyone here has any doubts... the eyes have it all."

Beverly Crusher had to agree. From beneath the shock of unkept, matted, raven black hair, burned the most defiant, blazing emerald green gaze she had yet seen. Crusher could

almost feel its viridescence burning through the media of the viewscreen as the child displayed open hostility to a universe that would treat an infant so.

"Yet the child does not cry," Crusher observed in a half whisper.

"She is Syrene," Evans replied simply. "Audio resumed, Captain Crusher."

The child was hustled off, and Daimon Dado returned to his position on the viewscreen, his permanent Ferengi grin-cum-grimace more exaggerated as he addressed the commanding officer of the shuttle craft.

"Well, Captain?"

"We are... satisfied that the child is of value," Crusher replied cautiously, biting her tongue to stop her railing at this Ferengi monster that every child born was of value, and how dare he subject this particular one to such a terrible ordeal in the name of commerce, removing her from whatever family support structure had been there for her prior to Ferengi intervention in her life.

"Of course the child is of value," the Ferengi Daimon snorted contemptuously, "and I would warn you that you are not the only ones interested in negotiations on this matter."

"There are others, Dado? Who?" demanded Crusher without preamble.

But the Ferengi tapped his nose in a curiously ancient Earth gesture, which supported his reply. "Ah, Captain... well you might ask. Sufficient to say, pay my price and you need never know."

Crusher glanced at Troi, who indicated with her one hand hidden by Evans at the helm, that they had to play for time.

"Then we shall start negotiations as previously agreed. Please send docking instructions to my helm," she replied crisply. "Crusher out."

The viewscreen went blank and the three women stood, or sat, in silence for a few moments, staring at the Ferengi ship through the shuttle's forward port.

"If I didn't know better, and had the benefit of knowing how fully applicable the term was, I

would say that Ferengi is a misogynist," Troi finally said to Beverly Crusher, who raised an inquisitive eyebrow, "although my ability to read the Ferengi race is somewhat limited."

"Deanna, I'm no empath, but I got that feeling too, loud and clear."

"There is an overwhelming hatred directed towards the child... and towards us," Deanna observed thoughtfully, "and it runs deep."

"Because we are Human... or because we are female?"

"I am an empath, not a telepath, Beverly," Troi responded with a small smile, "but there is something more to this than even relatively basic greed. I find Ferengi emotions difficult to gauge, but it is so strong even I can sense something."

"Any ideas, Patricia?" Beverly Crusher sat in the second seat at the helm next to the Emissary. "Other than his mother paid him too little attention. Maybe it's something to do with the fact he is Daimon of the Oumoc II, as opposed to the Oumoc I!"

"Maybe," Patricia responded, not taking her eyes from the controls of the shuttle for an instant.

"Ask Thelixepia when... if... we return to the Enterprise. What I do know is that it pays to be cautious of a Ferengi in the throes of wreaking his revenge for a past ill. Particularly if that revenge is in anyway profitable."

"Agreed," Troi said quietly. "Even recourse to an unprofitable revenge bears watching."

Her thoughts were clearly on the incident with Daimon Bok, and his extravagant 'gift' of the USS Stargazer to Picard that had almost resulted in the destruction of the USS Enterprise.

Beverly Crusher intercepted that distant look and was immediately reminded of the same images and horrors they evoked.

"Bok," she said simply, to which Troi nodded briefly. "Let us hope then that he is so wrapped up with his personal devils that he has no thought of checking out the credentials of the mysterious Captain B Crusher," Crusher observed, attempting to lighten the atmosphere lightly. "I have no wish to enter the annals of Starfleet legend wearing a borrowed uniform that

clashes so horribly with my hair I knew there was a reason why I chose science over command..."

"Shuttlecraft is now rendezvousing with Ferengi vessel Oumoc II, Commander," reported Worf from the Ops position, "but the Ferengi do not appear to be dropping their shields. A low range tractor beam appears to have locked onto the shuttlecraft and is pulling it through."

"Fascinating," Data observed, his attention fixed on the main viewscreen. "Computer, magnify the Ferengi vessel by a factor of 15."

The Bridge viewscreen was filled with the sight of the shuttlecraft being towed through the shields of the Ferengi ship in a shower of blue light emissions as the active field attempted to maintain its integrity despite the passage of the Tiberius through its activated energy pattern.

"Most curious," Worf observed. "It is not a technology I am currently familiar with."

"Indeed... although it does show similarities to devices reported from encounters with Krel ships," Data replied, his interest obviously piqued by the cunning Ferengi device - a device that meant the Oumoc II would never have to drop its shields whilst in space due to the mere inconvenience of personnel transference. "As well as Talarian..."

"It does however pose a small problem," Worf stated to his acting Captain as he watched the shuttle's progress beyond the shield and into the bowels of the Ferengi cruiser. "The Away Team is now effectively cut off from the Enterprise. The Ferengi shields appear to be of a modified nature and the resultant subspace interference has rendered their communicators unavailable."

He turned to look at Data, who was sitting in the big chair of command, a hand upon each armrest.

"Also, without prior knowledge of how to manipulate the device we have just observed, the Away Team's departure will be solely at the discretion of the Ferengi. Not a good situation to be in, sir."

"Agreed. However, our first priority is to return the Enterprise to full strength as quickly as possible," Data reasoned in his even tone before

tapping his communicator. "Dr Selaar, have you a status report?"

"Yes, Captain. The antidote seems effective, if a little slow. Key personnel have been selected for the first controlled dosages, which are proving successful. Two of the Syrene delegation have been working under the supervision of members of the Engineering team to adapt life support units to initiate gaseous antidote distribution. I will shortly be dispatching a medical team to the Bridge to treat the affected Bridge staff, prior to this work becoming active."

"Thank you, Dr Selaar."

Data looked at Worf, who returned his regard with an almost defensive posture. "Mojipe and Aglaopheme have, it so happens, Federation Engineering clearance. I have checked the secure core records and in the current emergency situation it seemed senseless to waste their talents."

There was a pause. The question of Syrene integrity in matters pertaining to the Enterprise hung between the two Bridge officers like a physical entity.

"And," added Worf, "they have been strictly supervised."

Data appeared satisfied, as he then hailed sickbay once more. "Dr Selaar, expected crew numbers available within the hour?"

"Approximately 50% to 55%, sir, assuming all respond as well to treatment as did the first few sample groups," came the dry Vulcan tones of the CMO's right hand.

"Commander La Forge to Bridge," came a welcome voice.

"Geordi!" exclaimed Data. "You sound much improved."

"I sound like I have a head that feels as if it's been used as a warp coil for the past week, or at least I should. And Data... the last thing I remember is an extensive level one diagnostic across the full extent of medical sensor systems... and now, suddenly, I'm in my cabin. What IS going ON?"

The Away Team was escorted to the Bridge of the Ferengi ship under close guard,

after first having been thoroughly searched for any suspect devices, as predicted by the Chief Medical Officer upon leaving the Enterprise. The atmosphere of the Oumoc II was making Beverly Crusher's nose wrinkle in distaste. The Ferengi, and it would appear their vessels also, had a distinct odour that was peculiar to them alone. Crusher had often heard Will Riker comment on it, but now found herself well able to agree with him on one point, and from a position of some authority. It was a smell that did not combine well with that of danger.

The Ferengi Daimon was sitting in one of the largest chairs Beverly thought she had ever seen, and its elevated position meant that one was in the uncomfortable position of almost having to crane one's neck back in order to see the commanding officer of the Ferengi ship.

"Captain Crusher... Counselor Troi, and Ensign Evans. Delighted to meet you all, I am sure." This urbane greeting was accompanied by a swishing, whooshing noise as the command chair returned to the deck to allow Daimon Dado to extricate himself from its richly upholstered depths. "Weecell, Ladies." The Daimon smiled in a particularly unpleasant fashion to Counselor Troi's way of thinking, staring somewhat lasciviously at their respective uniforms. "Welcome aboard."

Oh well, as long as he is happy with the number of pips, let him look, thought Troi with resignation, settling for fixing the Ferengi with one of her coolest Counselor stares.

Evans had moved closer to Crusher and had whispered in her commanding officer's ear. Unfortunately she had overlooked the fact that the bulk of the Ferengi species' head was in fact dedicated to the auditory.

"Of course your communicators do not work. I have a very effective subspace damper incorporated into my complex shield technology. That is the best thing about always insisting on negotiations taking place on your own territory - things happen on your own terms!"

"Your terms or no, Daimon Dado, we have a prearranged commitment to report to the Enterprise once aboard this vessel. Now whether it is by our own communicators or by your equipment, we have to do it, otherwise..." Crusher allowed her voice to trail off significantly into the silence of the Bridge.

The oily pleasantness of the Ferengi

Captain fell away from him like a cloak, to reveal the patently unpleasant dislike and contempt that had been obvious during the conversation aboard the shuttle.

"Otherwise WHAT, exactly?" Dado sneered.

"Otherwise the Enterprise will be alerted to the fact that the negotiations have turned hostile, and will go to battlestation alert." Crusher replied coolly, the nonchalant authority in her voice as she said the words enough to make even Troi shudder.

But she is so good at this! Deanna marvelled, the speed of adjustment by the Doctor to her new role impressive; even Deanna's empathic senses revealed only cold resolve.

The Ferengi Daimon seemed similarly aware of the red-headed Human's determination as she stood before him, and he finally waved irritably at one of his crew.

"All right, all right! Get them the Enterprise - but make it short!" he snapped churlishly.

The three Starfleet personnel exchanged glances with each other before moving forward to face the viewscreen. Beverly found herself sending up a silent prayer that Data would not act too surprised at their unscheduled contact. She need not have worried.

"Commander Data, we are calling in as expected," Crusher said as soon as Data came on screen, aware of Patricia Evans moving to stand behind her shoulder.

"Thank you, Captain," Data replied with aplomb. "We were somewhat concerned at the ability of the Oumoc's shields to filter out subspace communication. It would appear that the Ferengi ship possesses some interesting technologies..." Data moved his hands to emphasize his point.

"Yes. Yes!" Dado agreed with some ill temper. "Enough pleasantries. The negotiations will now commence." At his signal, the viewscreen was deactivated and he turned to the Away Team before him. "So... what do you bring to trade?"

"Daimon Dado, your actions directly violate the Federation code in ways too numerous to mention - a code the Ferengi are supposed to

abide by if they wish to enter into trade with the aligned worlds of the UFP," Crusher replied baldly, her voice almost a monotone, as if she was reading it from a book.

"So what?" the Ferengi blustered, somewhat amazed at the gall of this woman, Captain or no, coming to HIM for something HE was preparing to trade, and then telling him he should not do so.

"I am giving you the opportunity to hand over the child as an act of goodwill. It will not, of course, negate the obvious effects all this has had on the child herself, but it may go some way to smoothing things over with the Federation authorities."

Deanna and Patricia Evans could not believe their ears. They had not expected Beverly Crusher's high humanitarian ideals to get the better of her so early in the negotiations, and certainly not right at the start. Neither, apparently, had Dado.

"I have not got either the time or the inclination to point out to you, Captain Crusher, the lack of profit so evident in the Federation dealings with other worlds. Every day they commit crimes of commerce that breach every directive the Ferengi hold dear... and then you have the audacity to whinge when we do not adhere to your rules and regulations. Now - do you wish to trade or not, as I have a second customer due to arrive shortly to bid for the same goods?"

"First we want to see the child in person," put in Deanna quickly, with a quelling look at Beverly Crusher.

"Yes... yes." The Daimon seemed almost relieved that they were prepared to talk business again, and had them quickly whisked off before Captain Crusher could make him feel any more uncomfortable. As the three of them were hurried down the cramped, low Oumoc corridors, Patricia turned briefly as Deanna spoke plainly to Crusher.

"Are you trying to get us all into trouble?" she hissed, one eye on her Ferengi escort.

"Nope," Beverly answered simply, following her two colleagues at a measured pace.

"Then exactly WHAT were you doing?" Troi said irritably.

"Following your advice, Counselor. Psychology." Crusher smiled discreetly. "Do you think he would have been so ready to let us see the child if we had all chorused 'OK, Mr Nice Ferengi, we are just here as time wasters with a view to eventually turning kidnappers... shall we talk business?'"

"Sssh!" Patricia put her fingers to her lips as the Ferengi ceased their conversation and glanced suspiciously back. All three of the Away Team smiled, or at least bared their teeth briefly, until their escort continued on their way with the associated mutterings.

"So what did Data say?" Beverly whispered.

"They need another 60 minutes," Patricia answered in a low voice. "He signs well for a non-Syrene..." Then, puzzled, she glanced at Crusher. "How did you know?"

"Data's usual tendency is to be very economical with movement," Beverly replied. "You'd be suspicious too, if he started flapping his arms like some kind of Gallic charmer."

From the muttered words and gesticulations of their Ferengi escort it seemed fair to assume they had arrived at the Syrene child's accommodation, and when they were escorted into a facility incorporating a detention cell, the assumption became fact. The room was dimly lit, as was the whole Ferengi ship - the Ferengi would appear to be as sensitive to light as they were to extremes of noise.

The cell itself was bare, save one narrow bed upon which sat the mute, wide eyed prisoner who had been shown to them previously. However, in the flesh, the impact of the shock of raven black unkept hair and the wide terrified gaze of the captive was too much to ignore, as the child cowered in the corner.

"Drop that force field." Crusher's tone held only ice cold fury as she confronted the Ferengi guards. "And that means NOW, Mister!"

Upon her face was the expression that was known to make even Picard himself baulk at its prospect, and the Ferengi guards were made of meaner cloth than that. They promptly dropped the force field.

"This child is severely traumatised," Crusher observed to Troi as they stepped cautiously into the cell. "Look at her. She is like

a wild thing possessed!"

"And we are making her worse," Deanna realised, tuning in to the child's tear. "Back off, Beverly."

Beverly Crusher threw one look at her colleague and then promptly retreated a few steps.

"Hello." Deanna attempted to make herself less intimidating by crouching down. "Hello. My name is Deanna. What is your name?"

No answer save an even greater attempt to disappear into the corner of her prison, her eyes all the time upon the Enterprise Counselor, her green gaze emerald bright.

"Here, let me," said Patricia. "Go back outside the cell and leave me here."

Deanna Troi and Beverly Crusher withdrew from the cell as Patricia crouched down, her hands hardly moving in a coherent sense, just twitching as if with muscle spasms - but it was obvious to both women that the child's attention had been caught.

Minutes passed by as the two silent occupants of the Ferengi cell were watched closely by Human and Ferengi alike. Counselor Troi studied the child for body language signs, as well as emotional clues that would indicate that Evans was getting through the almost hysterical shell to the frightened child beneath.

Finally Evans straightened up and went to stand near the detention cell force field that had been reactivated by the cautious Ferengi guards upon Troi and Crusher withdrawing.

"Take this," Beverly opened up the med bag still hanging from Troi's shoulder, and withdrew a medical sensor. "See if she will let you do a quick scan on her."

The force field was deactivated upon Crusher's releasing yet another icy glare upon the Ferengi guard, who regarded the sensor with great suspicion. He even went as far as to reach to his belt for his Ferengi phaser whip, but Crusher turned the sensor off and then on again to demonstrate the sensor's lack of threat as an offensive weapon.

"I would not bother," Patricia Evans said in an undertone to Beverly Crusher. "The child is

basically all right, save a few cuts and bumps from the two escape attempts made by her. Otherwise she is fine - good job the Syrene are a tough bunch. This ordeal would have killed a lesser child."

"That makes it no more acceptable," Deanna Troi replied, glaring at the suspicious Ferengi. "It is time for us to commence negotiation. Captain?"

"Um... Yes, I suppose we had better." Crusher shook herself out of the reverie she had been in whilst staring at the scrap of Syrene within the cell, tenaciously clinging on to her existence despite efforts to the contrary.

"By the way," Patricia said suddenly, "her name is Sabinia."

"And this was previously unknown?" Riker ran his fingers through his thick hair and frowned, trying desperately to concentrate on Data's briefing at the emergency command meeting being held in the Captain's ready room.

Hell... more like an unready room at present! thought Riker to himself wryly, looking at the assembled crew.

"From what it has been possible to correlate in such a short period of time, it would appear that as other races build tangible evidence of civilization on their home planet or within their home system - this race's finest work is their genetic lineage as represented by their gene pool - and the resulting accumulated inherent ability... possibly even knowledge, but I am still somewhat sceptical of this particular claim," qualified the ever analytical Data, "despite the performance of Lucy Evans appearing to support said claim."

"So briefly Data, how has this... throwback to a Syrene genetic pattern occurred?" Picard asked curtly, his face also wearing a frown.

"If you have, for instance, sir, a Klingon father and a Syrenian mother, there is a 1 in 7 chance of female issue. A male child would be figuratively speaking 100% Klingon, in actuality 99.99% recurring. There is a small chance of a rogue gene in an apparently normal male recognising something in the genome of a non-Syrenian female whose male line has passed on a similar rogue gene. The result - "

"Is a child of a completely different racial origin," Picard finished, his tone carefully even. "A potential shock for the fond parents to be!"

"Somewhat reminiscent of the old Earth cuckoo, Captain," Riker said.

"Ah yes, Number One," the Captain agreed with a lift of his eyebrows.

"Except that the Syrene claim that the child still inherits its normal race parent's knowledge, sir," Data pointed out.

"And that is some claim... Is it possible to quantify it in some way? To claim a race not only inherits parental DNA... but learned knowledge?"

Picard shook his head, his doubt obvious. "I find that difficult to accept. My concept of a race blessed with such a gift would probably not be embodied by the Syrene. However, Geordi, you have worked with Lucy Evans on making good her damage to the control systems. Have you any input?"

"I have. She certainly has the capacity to learn with amazing speed - and to be honest, Captain, in my somewhat humble opinion, she does not seem to have that much left to learn about. At least where control systems are concerned, anyway."

"You are saying then that she is incredibly adept at learning, then, Geordi?" Riker asked, trying to narrow the frame of reference slightly.

"Well, that is something of a qualitative statement, Commander," Geordi answered, shifting somewhat uneasily in his chair, uncomfortable about being on the spot about such a subject. "Lucy Evans has an admirable grasp of the workings of a starship from high theory right down to nuts and bolts practice. She is conversant in the complex computer to physical interface routings in a way that I have only ever seen once before... and I don't think you want to know who it was who had knowledge quite that impressive. All this... and at 16 years old," Geordi added.

"She has spent her childhood in the company of exceptionally gifted parents, which could also account for her remarkable talents," responded Picard, ever the pragmatist. "However, we have not got the luxury of time to conjecture about such subjects. We have more important matters at hand." The Captain gave a deep sigh and briefly rubbed his temples before

looking at his third in command. "Status please, Mr Data."

Data stood slightly forward before starting his report.

"We are now back to full strength, Captain," Data reported. "The broad based antidote identified and produced by the medical team was successfully administered shipwide after the replicators had been base regenerated from clean main computer backups held on protected storage. All systems are back on line and functional, and diagnostics are showing results within acceptable norms."

"Well, it is reassuring to know that the ship at least is unharmed by this unscheduled escapade," observed Picard coolly, "although I am sure I have no need to remind anyone in this room of the Away Team still on board the Ferengi ship, and apparently beyond contact."

"I have already explained about the subspace dampeners built into the Ferengi field," replied Data helpfully. "Should you wish me to repeat -"

"No, Data." Picard's words sounded weary. Used to being so totally in control, the consequences of those few hours lost were obviously weighing heavily on his shoulders. "I am, to be honest, still somewhat at a loss as to what exactly was to be gained by allowing them to go, for whatever reason, to the Ferengi vessel. The Enterprise is in no fit state to ensure their safe return should the Ferengi decide to become... difficult."

"At the time," Data replied in his eternally calm and polite voice, "the options available to what remained of the crew were somewhat limited. We had been assured by Thelxepis of Achelous, who has apparently had dealings with Dado on previous occasions, that it was imperative to display, in the circumstances, a normal approach to the situation... I believe the appropriate phrase to be 'business as usual'."

"Mmmmm.... more like manipulation as usual," Picard observed darkly.

"Did you not question the Syrene assessment of Dado?" Riker asked his second. "Did you test it at all?"

"They were so accurate in predetermining other aspects of his behaviour that it seemed fair to assume they were right in this matter also,"

Data replied. "I consulted with Counselor Troi, and she agreed with the decision made to dispatch the expected Away Team to the Oumoc II, in order to buy the Enterprise more time."

"But 'business as usual', Mr Data?" Riker finally spoke. "An Away Team sent to a potentially hostile ship with no First Officer in attendance, or commanding officer? The Ferengi can be just a little too sharp sometimes - and they know their Federation protocol inside out!"

There was something of a lengthy pause. "Ah..."

Picard realised slowly that Data was looking as uncomfortable as it was possible for an android to appear. Unable to resist, he shot an intrigued look at Commander Riker, who raised an eyebrow at this conundrum, before pursuing the matter.

"Ah? Mr Data... Ah?" Picard had by this time fixed his second officer with the stare that his Bridge crew had come to know and fear.

Worf, seeing his friend and colleague almost in the throes of discomfiture, bravely drew Picard's fire like the warrior he was, his Klingon shoulders squared. "I think, sir, the Ferengi will not probably be aware of that particular point... yet," the Klingon growled from where he had been standing towards the rear of the Ready Room, next to the door to the Bridge.

"Mr Worf, did I address my question to you?" Picard asked quietly.

"No, sir."

"Then do you think I expected you to answer?"

"No, sir."

"Then if I address my next question to Mr Data, I can expect to have him answer it?"

"Yes, sir," Worf almost mumbled, looking away from Picard's steel sharp gaze as sheepishly as a Klingon could look.

"Mr Data..."

Data pulled in a deep breath, only to find out what the true meaning of the phrase 'saved by the bell' actually meant. Except in Data's case it was not so much being saved by the bell, as by the alert - the all too familiar Enterprise wail of

red alert.

All of Picard's officers from Lt Commander downwards exited the Captain's ready room with almost indecent haste, followed by Picard himself and Commander Riker, onto the Bridge.

"What is going on?" Picard bellowed over the seemingly abnormally loud red alert klaxon.

"Perimeter alert, sir." The sound of Worf's voice from the rear of the Bridge boomed easily above the noise. "Sensors indicate a Romulan Scout vessel, Captain, just dropping out of warp!"

The displeasure in the Klingon Security Chief's voice was audible even at its present amplitude.

"Turn that damned racket off!" Jean-Luc Picard snapped at no one in particular, before turning to the main viewer in the subsequent resounding silence.

"On screen, Mr Worf."

The main viewscreen of the Bridge instantly revealed the lean, hungry lines of a Romulan Scout Ship - bad enough news on its own, but Scout Ships rarely travelled anywhere near the neutral zone without a Romulan Warbird in close proximity, much less almost onto the borders of Federation space.

"Hail the Romulan vessel, Mr Worf."

"Hailing, sir... There is no response."

Picard drew in a deep breath, held it for a moment and then released it as a long sigh as he regarded the image upon the viewscreen. "Hail the Romulan vessel, Mr Worf. Do not wait for a response, just inform him that he is trespassing within the neutral zone and is in imminent danger of violating Federation space. We are observing his present course with... interest."

But it was clear that the Romulan vessel had already slowed and come to a full stop whilst just within the neutral zone borders. At this point, the Oumoc II moved from its stationary co-ordinates within Federation borders, across into the neutral zone in a clear effort to facilitate communication away from the Enterprise's sensors.

"Well, I'll be..." Riker turned to address his Captain. "It would appear that we are suspected

of being potential eavesdroppers, sir."

"It does look as if this is one party we are NOT invited to, Commander."

"At the risk of being a party pooper, Captain - do we, can we, intervene?"

"What I want to know is, who sent out the invitations, Number One," Picard responded, his face unreadable, "and what they intend doing with my Away Team!"

SEVEN

The Enterprise Away Team was, unfortunately, already aware that something unexpected was afoot at this point. For, as they went to leave, they found their way blocked by possibly the widest Ferengi any one of them had ever seen.

"You will stay."

Not a request. A statement, and one backed up by the curious Ferengi hand weapons as the Ferengi guard repeated it time and time again as the Away Team repeatedly tried to pass his bulky form.

"We are here to negotiate with Daimon Dado. We cannot do so from here," Troi pointed out reasonably, but even the patience of the Counselor was wearing thin in the face of such obdurate opposition from the Guards.

"You will stay here," was the repeated phrase, and indeed fact, of the moment.

"This is NOT looking at all..." Evans started.

"Hopeful?" replied Crusher with a meaningful glance at the secure nature of the detention area. "No, it is not."

"What do you think the chances are of our overwhelming the Guards, grabbing the child and getting the hell out of here?"

"With no phasers... hordes of Ferengi... as well as that weird docking field Dado insists upon using?" Crusher looked at the Emissary with one hand on her hip and her eyebrows raised. "Um. I'd say... zero."

Troi returned to her two team colleagues

having temporarily abandoned her attempts at persuasion, the martial light in her eye implying that even she was becoming more than a little ticked off at the Ferengi behaviour.

"Something has changed... and I wonder what it could be?" Troi murmured to herself, staring hard at the detention area's grey walls as if seeing through them, somehow, would grant her a clue.

"I wish we could communicate with the ship." Crusher started to pace with frustration. "I hope that Dado's information about the Enterprise is not what has caused this about face!"

"No. No, it's not the Enterprise. We have competition - I can sense non-Ferengi in very close proximity to this vessel."

"The rival party maybe? You can tell this?" Patricia looked at the empathic counselor with fascinated puzzlement and then looked across at the close figure of Beverly Crusher. "Can she be so sure?"

"You can bet on it," Crusher responded before moving to the Counselor's side. "How much more can you tell about them Deanna? Numbers, maybe?"

Troi looked momentarily into the middle distance, concentrating hard before shutting her eyes and giving a firm shake of her head.

"No... not accurately. Although I can't sense the emotional nuances of the Ferengi, there are still enough of them to get in the way - effectively, to block out those aboard this ship I can read. But there IS a distinct presence, and close, too, as well."

The three looked at each other with some misgiving, until Beverly finally broke the silence with a question. "Anything else, Deanna? Anything at all?"

"I'm not sure." The empath creased her forehead in concentration, watched closely by Evans, Crusher, and even Sabinia from the distant corner of her secure cell.

"The strength of the presence could indicate individuals from a potentially telepathic race, such as Betazoid, Vulcan, or even possibly..."

"Romulan?" responded Beverly, her voice

hoarse, her eyes fixed as if mesmerised on the entrance to the detention area.

The Ferengi guards had parted to allow access to two male figures, one tall with an incredibly superior, almost haughty expression on his dark, autocratic Romulan features. He surveyed the detention area and its inhabitants with distinct distaste as if all this were somehow far beneath him, his gaze ice cold and clinical. The individual who had preceded him was somewhat shorter, almost stocky, with the sallow complexion tinged with minute green veins that designated an individual of Vulcan descent who was prone to potential excess.

Both wore the distinctive grey belted tunics draped with the ceremonial sash of Romulan High Command. Both their faces bore carefully neutral expressions, denoting neither surprise nor alarm at perceiving a Federation Starfleet team in the depths of the Ferengi vessel they had just boarded. On the contrary, the shorter of the two Romulan representatives marched confidently towards the Away Team, a wry twist to his lips as he said with excruciatingly arid politeness. "Ah... Why, Doctor Beverly Crusher, I presume."

The Enterprise team could only stare at the arrivals, then at each other, totally nonplussed.

Picard spun on his heel and regarded the Klingon officer at the communications post with a somewhat furious glint in his normally collected gaze. "Communications as well, Mr Worf?" he asked, his voice grim.

"It was a cleverly hidden bypass that tricked the system into thinking there were no messages either to receive or transmit, sir, a minute, yet effective adjustment."

"Indeed, Mr Worf." Picard's anger at someone maliciously tinkering with his ship was clear in every line of his body, every angle of his face, as he regarded his Bridge crew in stony silence.

"I will trust your thoroughness, gentlemen, to ensure there is nothing of a similar nature hidden in the weapons systems," he said eventually.

Riker looked from Captain Picard to Lt Worf, and then back to the viewscreen again. At least they had explained why the Enterprise was

being so pointedly ignored by the other two vessels, an unusual occurrence in any circumstance, much less when the two other vessels were involved in what appeared to be highly illegal negotiations right under the USS Enterprise's bows, on the very fringes of the Federation space she was pledged to protect.

"Sir, sensors indicate that some form of auxiliary vessel has just docked successfully with the Ferengi ship."

"Thank you, Mr Data," Picard replied, studying the viewscreen with an intensity that rivalled the ship's sensors for thoroughness.

"I watch this..." Picard turned to Riker and indicated the image... "and I ask myself why? Why now? Why here?" Captain Picard moved to his command chair, and sat heavily, his chin in his hand. "And why so damned confident?"

"They do have the Away Team on board, sir..." Riker pointed out.

"And maybe also the advantage of us too, Number One." Picard raised an eyebrow at his First Officer. "Perhaps they THINK they know more about the Enterprise's recent incapacitation than we give them credit for."

"That," Riker replied emphatically, "I do NOT like the sound of."

"No - it is not a very comfortable thought," Picard agreed.

"Captain - the Ferengi Daimon contacted the Enterprise prior to the appearance of the Romulan vessel, which would suggest that the system has been sabotaged within the last 50 minutes," Data pointed out from his position at Ops.

"Agreed, Data. Mr Worf, see that the Syrenusae are confined to quarters under armed guard until further notice, and that Engineering is cleared of all nonessential personnel. Go to full red alert."

"Aye, sir."

"Bridge to La Forge."

"La Forge here, Captain."

"Geordi, I want a level one diagnostic scan run on all systems. I am assigning Data to help you. Concentrate on Communications and

weapons systems. Anything - the smallest anomaly - I want tracked down and thoroughly investigated." Picard's tone alone made it clear it was not a request. It was an order.

"Aye, sir."

"Captain, the most comprehensive way to check the ship's communication and sensor systems would be to launch a low frequency communications buoy. Test signals could then be assessed, both incoming and outgoing."

"Make it so, Mr Data."

"Shall I make arrangements for Thelxepia to be escorted up for an interview, Captain?" Riker suggested dourly, his face unusually stern.

Picard grunted his assent to his First Officer's suggestion, before adding, "And Commander - as soon as those weapons systems are on line, clean, I want phasers armed and ready. When that becomes evident on the Romulan and Ferengi sensor systems, I doubt if we will be ignored for much longer."

"Captain, the Away Team -"

"Commander?" Picard's expression asked if his First Officer was really about to question this command decision.

"Aye, Captain."

"Oh... and Will." Picard paused momentarily, breathing out slowly and pinching his bottom lip between finger and thumb before making his next request. "Have Lucy Evans and Aglaopheme accompany the Syrene leader to the Conference room, please."

Will Riker raised one eyebrow at this.
"Aye, sir."

"We insist that we are released at once!" Beverly Crusher insisted icily from where she stood at the front of the detention cell. "You are acting in direct contravention of Federation -"

"I remind you, most respectfully, Dr Crusher, that you are in fact aboard a non-Federation aligned craft... and I think that even the more palatable aspects of Dado's interstellar trade would have had him exiled from Federation space eons since."

"This act is still in violation of any treaty you care to mention, BeAn!" Beverly snapped angrily. "To say nothing of those reports I have heard of your heinous ethical conduct."

The shorter of the two Romulan 'gentlemen' stepped from the dim recesses of the detention area outside the secure cell itself, and approached the incensed CMO with a quixotic little-boy-lost look that settled somewhat oddly upon his satyric Romulan features.

"Oh my... Do I sense disapproval, Dr Crusher? How fascinating to experience, first hand, the bioethical outrage of the famous Dr Crusher herself. I attended a very interesting seminar given by yourself at Starfleet medical some time ago now. Let me see... what was it entitled?" The Romulan tapped his temple in a contemptuous gesture, somewhat in keeping with his general tone. "My memory... Ah, yes, something not unlike 'medical ethics and alien cultures' or some other such nonsensical title."

Troi threw a quelling glance at the Doctor, aware that for some reason the Romulan was doing his best to goad her colleague to the furthest limits of her patience. Dr Crusher nodded slightly at the Counselor, and tried almost visibly to calm her fury, pushing her chin up, her eyes still sparkling with suppressed animosity.

"Indeed? I am sure I had no idea that I was entertaining such an illustrious audience," she replied, her voice dry with sarcasm. "I'm sure Starfleet Medical would be thrilled to know that such a wide scientific audience think their conferences worthy of a visit, and I wait in some anticipation for a reciprocal invitation." Her tone implied she was not about to hold her breath, though.

"It was indeed a fascinating case that you presented, Doctor. Your views are... predictable, but you present them in a very original and, dare I say it, enthusiastic fashion. But at the end of the day, Starfleet verbiage is... Starfleet verbiage, after all!"

"You have a right to your opinion, BeAn," Beverly returned acidly, "but not, I think, the right to impose that opinion upon others with rights of their own. An act as immoral as it is reprehensible!"

"Strong words, Dr Crusher - but... sadly empty. I would remind you that I am on the right side of this particularly nasty forcefield

here." He pointed in close proximity to the detention cell force field, making it briefly shimmer a sparkling bright red with a loud, crackling report, before stepping back. "Whereas you are not!"

Dr Crusher flexed her fists with a very unhippocratic urge to slap that smirk physically off his corpulent Romulan Face.

"Your opinions, dear Doctor, are quite academic. A far more fascinating subject for discussion must surely be, what is the eminent Doctor Beverly Crusher doing posing as a Captain of a Starfleet vessel - a Starship no less... and the Enterprise at that."

He pulled a small mowe of interested distaste.

"Dado was, of course, almost hysterical when I told him. He is without doubt one of the most paranoid individuals within the whole of the known galaxies - but then so would you be if you had no less than 92 contracts of death levied on your head by 54 different races."

BeAn paced the width of the entrance and back again, before addressing the occupants of the Ferengi detention cell.

"Oh, come on... an eminent Starfleet Medical Doctor, a beautiful woman who looks as if she carries more than just a drop of Betazoid blood - and, if I am not much mistaken, a mature Syrene?"

Beverly regarded the Romulan with acute distaste. *My God, he is going to start drooling,* was all she could think and as she caught Deanna's eye she realised she must have revealed her exasperation and revulsion to her empathic colleague, as if she had broadcast it at the top of her voice to normal Humans.

"And what of the child?" Evans had stood, and advanced towards BeAn, obviously realising that the time for discretion was at an end. "We came here originally to negotiate for the release of the girl."

"Oh - you mean the 'rogue'... the 'loopback'?"

Evans physically jumped at hearing the taboo terms of her race on the lips of an enemy.

"Ah yes. I have all the little terms and phrases used by yourselves at my disposal,

Madam Syrene. But I do not think 'negotiate' is one of them."

He turned to go, and then, as it struck by an afterthought, he turned back to the cell. "And by the way - we did know of the incapacitation of the Enterprise, you know, possibly even before yourselves. That's one reason why Daimon Dado has yet to remove his very speedy ship into the next sector since finding out about your 'little games'. Since you came on board, we have ensured that our agents aboard the Enterprise have rendered it truly ineffective... and there is a Warbird due shortly to collect our little... added bonus. So, until later... Ladies." And a condescending mock salute, he removed himself from the area, shadowed by his taller colleague.

"Can we really believe him?" Crusher turned to ask Evans and Troi.

"I sincerely hope not," Troi replied with no little feeling. "We have to get out of here, and I would like a ship to get back to."

"I cannot believe that BeAn looks so... ordinary. I've heard such tales, I know him to be a monster by his deeds - yet he seems so... well, innocuous!" Patricia marvelled, her confusion patent. "He is a murderer, I know this as fact, but he appears... harmless."

"Well, he may not be your most likely candidate for a genocidal maniac," Crusher remarked wryly, "but I for one do not really want to wait around to prove anything conclusively, one way or the other... Deanna, did you get anything?"

"Apart from your angry frustration, you mean?"

Beverly gave her Betazoid colleague a sardonic stare.

"Hmmm..." Deanna, suddenly business like, stood up from her seat on the bunk by the rear wall. "It is interesting. From BeAn I sense intense curiosity, ambition... and almost glee at the coup he has achieved against the Enterprise. But..."

"Go on, Counselor," Patricia Evans urged her, moving to stand at Dr Crusher's side.

"BeAn's colleague, accomplice, whatever, was displaying a clear range of strong emotions. Revulsion, horror, fear - and I mean real fear. There seems to be some ambiguity about his role

in all of this for some reason, as I also discerned an element of indecision. However, as soon as BeAn mentioned my Betazoid blood, his emotional control switched it all off, almost like a shutter coming down, leaving only distant, intellectual interest. An impressive feat, as Romulans are, by their very nature, quite emotional beings."

"And that is our weak link," Beverly Crusher observed dolefully, looking longingly beyond the confines of their prison to the Ferengi control panel opposite. "Unless, of course, anyone has any better ideas...?"

Picard sat in his chair at the head of the table in the conference lounge, his face stern, unreadable, as he regarded the three women sat alongside him. Commander Riker had elected to stand behind the Captain's chair, his face similarly inscrutable.

"Thank you for attending this meeting, Thelxepia, Aglaopheme, Lucy." Picard nodded to each of the Syrene in turn.

"Not that we had much choice, Captain," Agla pointed out, her voice cold.

"Indeed. I required your presence so that we could discuss the present situation." Picard continued, ignoring Agla's jibe, "and those repercussions from Miss Evans'... antics."

"I have already apologised several times, and have made good any damage I may have done," Lucy replied defensively, her voice tinged with an almost surly intonation.

"Do you really think an apology coupled with a few hours' work is likely to make sufficient amends for the risk you put the Syrene delegation and the crew of MY ship in?" Picard bit out icily, rising to his feet, whilst tugging at his uniform top. He continued, "Which leads me to my question about the nature of the compound you exposed my crew to."

Lucy cast a nervous look at Aglaopheme as she went to answer Captain Picard, licking her lips as if her mouth were dry.

"It was a simple anaesthetic compound..." she started.

"No, Miss Evans, it was not. Not with respect to its effect upon the Human metabolism.

Quite the contrary in fact, according to my medical team." Picard's quiet tone belied the angry edge to his voice.

"The longer the crew was exposed to the effects of the substance, the higher the risk of fatal. I believe the term Dr Selaar used was hyptogenetic narcotic."

"But that is impossible!" Agla's voice cut through the heavy silence that suddenly enveloped the room. "The compound was not of a fatal nature that..." Her voice trailed off as she realised with horror and distaste what she had been betrayed into imparting.

"But Lucy did not use the compound you suspected - did you, Lucy?" Riker stated from beside Picard. "A harmless anaesthetic?"

"I... must have got it wrong," Lucy stuttered, throwing a combination of looks at both Thelxepia and Aglaopheme. "The programming was very complex."

"Got it wrong. Too complex for someone of your extraordinary gifts, Lucy Evans? Excuse me if I find that rather hard to believe - the compound that you chanced upon, by accident, being a hyptogenetic substance that has been illegal in the Federation for decades?"

"A hyptogenetic is too complex to be an accident, and built in safety overrides within the replicator systems would have had to have been bypassed," Riker pointed out.

The ensuing pause seemed to stretch for an abnormally long length of time.

"So?"

There was another lengthy pause.

"And so to my next question. Who gave you the formula, Lucy?"

Picard's voice was insistent. Silence stretched out still longer, until, "What the hell does it matter?" Lucy spat back at Captain Picard, her face openly contemptuous. "There is nothing you can do anyway. I'm a minor - so what can you do, lock me in the brig, Jean-Luc?"

Picard refused to rise to the bait, choosing instead to reply with some conviction, "If that is what is necessary to get to the bottom of the threat to my crew and ship, Madam - yes."

Lucy lounged back momentarily in her chair, before insolently kicking it away from the table and standing up.

"Then you had better call in that Klingon security detail of yours, Picard, because I'm not going anywhere quietly!"

Picard and Riker exchanged resigned glances, but as Riker went to tap his communicator for Security, a voice with the cutting edge of honed steel said with great clarity, "Leucosia, sit down and answer the questions."

"Why should I? Because you say so? The Great Leader of a race of cowards, all of them hiding away behind whatever excuse or disguise they have managed to cobble together for themselves over the years?"

Aglaopheme was upon her feet at this Syrene transgression, her tread purposeful as she instantly advanced on the young Syrene from her position on the opposite side of the conference lounge table. But Lucy was not about to be cowed so easily. "No wonder our race is such a great secret - it's an embarrassment to belong to it! Well, it's too late. Dado is here, and the Ferengi is here for us all. He's not here to negotiate over one Syrene child. He knows the Enterprise has been incapacitated by now. It's all just a matter of time now before he comes over here for the whole miserable delegation!"

Lucy's green eyes glittered with bitter triumph as she drew herself up to her full height.

"Don't you see, you stupid old woman? They will not be able to ignore us any more. The Federation cannot ignore an official delegation being snatched from a Federation Starship by Ferengi slavers. The UFP would have to fight to defend our rights then!"

"And the Ferengi would fight to defend what they see as their right to trade," Thelxepia pointed out sadly, "and what then, you silly child?"

"All out war," Riker answered shortly. "An intergalactic bloodbath over trade ethics."

"And at last the Syrene would be truly free!" Lucy sighed, idealistic zeal clear in her voice. "Free from persecution, free from discrimination... free to stand up and state their true heritage!"

"And for how long?" Picard asked

reasonably. "For how long will this idyll last? There's only one group of people who I can see benefiting from this scheme, and it is not the Syrene."

"The Romulans," Aglaopheme suddenly said in an assured voice. "They win twice over. Subjects for BeAn's experiments and an intergalactic war they are conveniently on the sidelines for the duration of. And you would condemn the entire delegation to such a foul and painful death Leucosia? Molpe, Pisinoe, Ligia... myself, for this?"

"We would die martyrs... like Marta Lean!"

"We would die... and the gene pool would lose the House of Gaca and most of the House of Sterope, not to mention that of Achelous. Your Human upbringing has left you sadly lacking - Marta Lean died to preserve those things... your Human nature seeks only to destroy them." Aglaopheme shook her long dark mane with a sigh of regret. "All I can say is that at least Parthenope has not had to bear witness to this - for it sickens me, and you are not of my issue."

Aglaopheme gave the Syrene girl a slighting look from beneath drawn brows as she drew out a chair on her present side of the table, whilst Lucy remained standing.

"So tell us about the person who gave you the formula to knock out the Enterprise, Leucosia," Agla continued.

"I will not... and you cannot make me!" Lucy sneered.

"Then I will tell you. Romulan Centurion Motok, agent for the Romulan Empire, at present based in the sector that includes the Vulcan colony that is your nominated homeworld. He is ambitious, ruthless... but a little careless. He likes to drink, usually something with a little more kick to it than synthehol... unfortunately, when he does so, his tendency to brag in the right company can prove his undoing. You see, Motok cannot hold his liquor, somewhat unusual and unfortunate in the race that blessed the universe with the gift of blue ale."

Lucy could only stare at the other Syrene with amazement.

"He gave you the formula to knock out Captain Picard's crew, he was the one who instructed you then to disable the weapons and communications systems... and if necessary, you

were to neutralize life support function."

Aglaopheme at this point turned to the watching figures of Riker and Picard.

"Molpe and I have done our best to reverse most of Leucosia's recent handiwork, but Motok's plans never included the presence of your remarkable Commander Data, Captain. I would hazard a guess that Motok has promised to deliver the flagship of Starfleet on a platter to the Romulan High Command. He is no doubt warping his way from deep within Romulan space on a Warbird as we speak."

"You lie," Lucy snarled, incensed. "You lie...you cannot believe this. She is the one who betrayed us... as she betrayed Marta Lean!"

"A traitor, Leucosia?... Was it I who condemned Thelxepia, Molpe, Ligia and your mother to a lingering martyr's death whilst you and Motok went on to enjoy the rosy future of the Empire's favourites?"

"No!" Leucosia's eyes were wide. "No! No!"

"I wish I could believe that, Leucosia of Gaea, truly I do. But you have forgotten the first law of the Syrene code, that one's first and only ever true devotion must be to the pool."

Lucy ran to Thelxepia and dropped to her knees at the Syrene Elder's feet.

"Please, Thelxepia. Please, you must believe me. I wanted our race to be free of the shackles that leave it prey to others - he promised me that..."

Thelxepia of Achelous rose to her feet with regal majesty and stared at the young woman at her feet.

"Get up, Leucosia, surely you have disgraced the Syrene sufficiently for today. It must, in part, be for your mother as Head of the House of Gaea to decide your fate... not those of us here. That is unless you wish to detain her, Captain?"

"Under the circumstances, I think it would be better if you deal with this, Madam," Picard said respectfully, with a glance at his First Officer, who nodded his head briefly in agreement with the Captain.

"So be it... Aglaopheme, nominate one of

the Guardians to shadow Leucosia of Gaea."

"Yes, Thelxepia." Aglaopheme bowed briefly to her leader. "It shall be done. Captain Picard, I require one of your Security Officers to escort Leucosia to the Syrene quarters."

"Of course, Aglaopheme," Picard replied, immediately hailing Security.

"Can I ask a question of you, Aglaopheme?" Riker said suddenly.

The Syrene woman regarded him haughtily, one eyebrow raised.

"Why were you so surprised at the fact that Lucy used a hypogenetic narcotic? Almost as if you knew she would use something else?" *

"Because initially she came to us with the scheme for drugging the Enterprise and we supplied her with the formula for a harmless placebo. She knew that we knew about that. Then, also, because I had thought that we had managed to intercept the information that Motok was receiving from the Romulan High Command, and we had attempted to substitute what has turned out to be the hypogenetic compound with something less deadly... both avenues were somewhat unsuccessful, it would appear!"

"You play at games with high stakes," Picard observed as the two grave faced women stood before him, their attitude resolute.

"They are the only games worth playing," Thelxepia observed somewhat sadly, as the doors to the conference lounge swished open to allow the Enterprise security detail to escort away the quietly sobbing Lucy, the girl hiding her disgrace with the cowl of her tunic, as the party left, Aglaopheme bringing up the rear.

"It was said that the Sirene of old Earth myth were cursed by Aphrodite for being rebellious to love, exiled to the rocks off my home continent as their punishment," Picard observed as he watched them leave.

"An interesting comparison, sir, but I doubt even those mythical creatures managed to wreak the kind of havoc that their space bound counterparts have."

"Speaking of which," Picard said crisply, "we must return to our own counter measures and intrigues, Number One."

Riker stepped back to allow the Captain to precede him from the conference lounge, whilst tapping his communicator with a sure hand.

"Mr Data... have you any results of the level one diagnostics currently being run across essential systems at present?"

"Yes, Commander Riker. Geordi, Worf and myself have managed to locate several anomalies which are MOST intriguing...."

Deanna Troi felt the arrival of the taller of the two Romulan negotiators within the detention area before she actually saw him in the dim Ferengi lights. She moved smoothly from her seat on the floor near the feet of Patricia Evans and the child, moving to stand near the door.

"My name is Haakas, and I will tell you now, I am no weak link." He regarded the occupants with the by now familiar autocratic haughtiness that seemed to pervade his features constantly.

"In fact, if anything, I am more committed to my cause than anyone aboard this ship. The Ferengi are monitoring your conversation," he added almost as an afterthought. His accent was heavy, the universal translators having some problems with his nuances of pronunciation.

"Forgive us if we do not react with surprise," Deanna Troi responded sharply, her arms crossed before her as she regarded the individual before her. "And if you are so committed to your so called cause, why then the ambiguity of purpose I can sense so clearly from you?"

The Romulan moved closer and said in an undertone, "You cannot be certain of any such ambiguity."

"Then why the need to come here and justify yourself?" Deanna replied in a whisper, her glance assessing. "Are you here to convince yourself as well as us?"

"You would not understand!" he finally hissed out, half turning away from the gaze of the Counselor, and then turning back again as the Counselor said quietly,

"Maybe not. But I can understand the ambiguity within you... the sense of loss, and of

betrayal."

Deanna felt a presence at her side, and looked round, and then down, to see Sabinia beside her. She was regarding the Romulan on the other side of the forcefield with interest and, most surprisingly, recognition.

"Do you know this child?" she asked Haakas, puzzled, as the small Syrene figure walked forward and held her palm up towards him, palm outwards.

"How can she recognize you? If you come with BeAn, surely this is the first time you have seen the child?" Troi asked, a note of urgency in her voice.

Deftly, the Romulan flicked a small piece of perspex towards the base of the force field, sufficient for it to set up a droning whine from the field disturbance, loud enough to mask his words.

"No, it is not." The austere line of the Romulans jaw was tense with anger and restraint, rigid with what strangely appeared to be some form of wounded pride. "It is truly a shame that you are here... I had no idea that there would be Federation involvement in such a business."

"We are here to save the child," Troi insisted. "The Enterprise is here solely by chance, not design. We have come to help her."

"Then that is also a shame, for now we must all die."

"Die? What do you mean... Haakas, what do you mean, DIE?"

But the question went unheard as the Romulan Haakas had bent down on one knee to address the small Syrene child with quiet words, and an almost tender look on his saturnine face, his accent so rich that the universal translators gave up entirely on some of what he said.

"I know you are Romulan enough to understand what must be done here, daughter of mine, you know as I do that this must be done for the sake of Mnhei'sahe; for the Haakas Hififar there is no other course for us to take. We must be determined to do our duty by the Hififar to the last, ssuej-d'ify?"

Counselor Troi was so stunned at his words that she gave a slight jump as someone touched her gently on the shoulder.

"What is going on?" Beverley Crusher's face was dark with anxious concern. "What exactly do you mean by those words, Haakas?"

"I must destroy this ship and all aboard if needs be. Mnhei'sahe demands it."

Only the child stared back at him, unblinking, unafraid. The others in the cell were agast. Evans was upon her feet in an instant, fighting to keep her voice low to avoid the sensitive Ferengi communication systems.

"What do you mean, destroy this ship, we all must die... who appointed you all powerful deity of the month?" Evans hissed.

"It is the only way," Haakas insisted with a worrying lack of emotion. "It is an act of necessity."

"Necessity?!! To kill all those on board this vessel, including this child?... It's more like an act of insanity!"

The Romulan regarded Evans with irritated patience, his face cool, reserved.

"How can anyone from the Federation galaxies ever think they could understand the motivations of a Romulan? Our cultures are very different, your aims and objectives quite alien to our own. This child is my daughter. I cannot allow her to fall into the hands of BeAn or the Ferengi, for I know what they plan and it sits ill with the natural order of the universe. So I will purge their presence."

"But at what cost?" Crusher appealed.

"The family, the Hsifhar, that I and... the child come from, is an ancient and powerful one within the Romulan political arena. We bear no less than two senatorships within our bloodline. Senatorships that in our culture are passed down the female line of sisters to eldest children."

He shut his mouth suddenly, as if he had been carried away by the things he was saying, and had suddenly realised the culturally intimate nature of what he was imparting.

"We like to think that we are good servants to the Star Empire, we try to use our power with honour and justice and it has made us many enemies, both inside the senate and outside. Whereas a Praetor can be made or bought, a Haakas senator cannot, and there are any number

of corrupt officials who would gieefully see our family stripped of both honour and name."

Haakas straightened up and stared down at the scrap of raven haired defiance that stared up at his face with composure.

"And my alien daughter is the ideal means by which to do it. She is proof that the all-important hereditary female line is less than pure, she provides evidence that it is entirely possible that a non-Romulan has gained access to the senate in the name of Haakas. She was the blessed curse that would see our family fall - so I had her sent away to a distant colony world where no one could possibly divine which family she belonged to. She was...fostered by others of our race, but as it was, people became increasingly alarmed as the child grew older and revealed her race potential."

The proud autocratic face of the Romulan man looked pale in the dim light, but Troi dare not utter any words lest she destroy his catharsis.

"By the time I had word of how bad things were, the Ferengi sseikea had already removed her - I can only thank the Elements that Rrhianna is not alive to see her longed for child treated thus."

He finished with a long, lonely sigh.

"Then surely that is all the more reason to give your daughter a chance to live, Haakas." Deanna entreated. "It sounds as if what the child has had already can hardly be called a life. She deserves a second chance....not a death sentence."

"To die, simply because she is Syrene," Beverley Crusher murmured. "What a depressingly common theme at present."

"I cannot take that risk!" Haakas snapped. "It is out of my hands...it is Mnhei'sahe!" as if that explained everything. He then paced away from the entrance to the cell, appearing furiously angry.

"Mnhei...?" Crusher was not about to admit she had difficulty in even pronouncing it in front of Haakas. "Deanna?"

"The ruling passion...one of the very few things we are aware of within Romulan Society. Where 'face' or honour is to be maintained by whatever means are necessary. It is an incredibly strong motivating force that should never be foolishly underestimated by those of us not

bound by such rigid codes."

"Then it means things are done for someone's good?" Beverley asked, her brow furrowed as she tried to make sense of this very severe culture.

"Not necessarily...one does things for one's own good, one's own honour, and if properly carried out the actions in question will have benefited the honour of all parties in the transaction as well."

"Something tells me the Ferengi are probably not quite ready for this concept yet," Crusher observed wryly to the Counselor as she leant back against the wall of the detention cell, "particularly as it means the annihilation of the Oumoc II in its execution."

By this time, Haakas' paced circuit of the detention area under the watchful eyes of the two Ferengi guards had brought him back again to within three paces of Counselor Troi and Beverley Crusher.

"That enemies of the Empire should be here to witness our race's debasement in this matter, and at the hands of the Ferengi -" he spat the last word out with loathing - "is the final insult. Sub Commander Motok was to have been assigned as High Command aide on this mission, but I finally managed to be nominated as replacement with no little effort. Let us hope that I alone am enough to redeem Romulan face in this matter."

"But it does not have to be like this... to sacrifice your daughter for some outmoded concept of honour. We could take the child. We have a party of her race on board the Enterprise that have come for this child," Troi appealed.

"Never! I, Haakas, will not be beholden to these female thrallin, to condemn her to a lifetime with such people. It would be better to end it here and now."

"You cannot know that!" Evans retorted angrily. "Our race is as ancient as your own. Your daughter belongs to an ancient House within our people's culture, just as she does within your own Hfifshar. If you do not want her contribution to your line - then we do!"

"Enough!" Haakas growled angrily, his sallow skin tinged with bronze green as an unbecoming flush stole over his hawklike features.

"Enough or thus. I have said all I will on this... the matter is at an end: Ssuaj-ha,lhhei?"

And with that, Haakas spun on the heel of his boot and swept out after barking an angry list of requests at the Ferengi, who had been watching the proceedings with undisguised yet cautious interest.

"What now?" Crusher muttered in an undertone. "I think the only thing we can depend on Haakas for is a speedy end, as opposed to merely a speedy end to our predicament."

Then suddenly the Ferengi ship shuddered, the lights dimming almost to blackout as the distinctive effects of phasers upon shields were apparent. Instantly an alien sounding klaxon screamed out the Ferengi version of general quarters red alert. The two Enterprise officers looked at each other, and then at their Ferengi goalers who had opened the doors to the detention area and were peering out into the corridor in obvious alarm.

"Don't worry, Beverly," Troi whispered, reaching up into her thick swathe of brown hair, the bulk of which was twisted into a heavy top knot. "I think the cavalry is on its way."

And with that she coolly pulled a type 1 phaser from her binding plaits.

"Still no response, Captain," Worf reported to Picard, as the Captain paced the length of the Bridge, glanced briefly at Commander Riker and his security officer before pacing back to stand behind Commander Data's shoulder.

"Arm phasers again, Mr Worf," Picard bit out crisply. "Fire when ready at the Ferengi ship. A brief burst of low intensity fire should do it!"

"Phasers locked on and firing, sir," reported Worf in his deep voice.

Captain Picard put his chin in his hand, contemplating the situation that he now had to hand. The Romulan scout ship and Ferengi vessel had pointedly ignored his hails on all channels - those to the Romulan craft with respect to the fact that it was obviously flouting the conditions of the neutral zone and was perilously close to impinging on Federation space; the Ferengi craft with respect to the fact that to all intents and purposes they appeared to be holding the Enterprise Away Team as hostage.

But there had been no response at all from either vessel... yet.

"Captain, we could be putting CMO Crusher, Counselor Troi and the Emissary at some risk if we pursue this present tactic," Riker warned, his tone tactful.

"Thank you, Mr Riker." Picard regarded his First Officer without rancour. "I am aware of the ramifications of starting a fight - but the potential predicament of our Away Team and the whole situation is just as bleak if we do not do everything within our power to start some form of dialogue now, otherwise conflict is inevitable. Agreed, Number One?"

"Yes, sir," Riker responded.

"Your input is nonetheless appreciated and duly noted, Commander," Picard stated quietly, with the merest glimmer of a smile.

"Sir, the Ferengi vessel is now hailing us," Worf announced from the communications position on the Bridge dais.

"Excellent. On screen, Mr Worf," Picard replied, turning to face the Enterprise Bridge's main viewscreen, with the merest twitch of his uniform top.

"Enterprise! This is an outrage! You... To whom am I speaking, Human?" Dado bellowed in fury from the viewscreen.

"?!" Picard threw a puzzled glance at Riker before returning his attention to the Daimon. "Why, I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Commanding Officer of the USS Enterprise..."

Deanna Troi was crouched cat-like near the detention area force field as Evans discreetly waved her more to the left, and then a little to the right, before giving the Enterprise Counselor a clear thumbs up sign.

"That'll do it, Deanna," she hissed in a loud whisper, but the Ferengi guards were not disposed to eavesdrop. They had enough to occupy them with their red alert.

"Is this truly the best way?" Crusher asked Evans, in a low undertone. "Once the internal power source of even a hand phaser channels power back onto itself and blows, it can damn near destroy things up to 4 or 5 metres away!"

"Surely you don't want to stay here?" Evans asked her.

"Yes, but still..." Crusher looked at the Emissary out of the corner of her eye. "Okay point taken. Well, these should give us some badly needed additional protection..." And with that, Beverly Crusher started deftly pulling the mattresses from the bunk area.

"Here - Sabinia, sit here." The Syrene child obediently did as she was bid, sliding down into the small gap between two of the bunks in the corner of the cell furthest from the point of the potential blast.

"Ready?" Deanna hissed, looking around at other members of the Away Team.

Beverly Crusher and Patricia Evans nodded their assent, and with that, Deanna flicked open the top of the small mark I phaser, and using her thumbnail pushed the internal switch up onto overload capacity. She placed it where Evans and she had decided, and then dashed for cover as the high pitched, shrill warning whine of a phaser on overload built to an ear piercing crescendo. The shattering noise was accompanied by shouts of panic and pain from the nearby Ferengi, the whistling volume too much for their sensitive ears to bear.

Crouched behind the thin mattresses, the four captives braced themselves, cringing, waiting for critical point to be attained. It did not take long. The feedback of power within the internal mechanism of the small weapon exploded with more force than anyone present had really expected.

Then - silence. Ear numbing, deathly, total, wonderful silence. As the dust settled, Crusher coughed slightly, stiffly moving around in the position where she had wedged herself against the furthest wall, sheltering behind her knees.

"Geez!" she exclaimed, her voice a dusty croak. "Deanna?"

"Uh... Yes. Yes?"

"Next time you decide to hide a phaser about your person, let me know in advance so I can remember to bring an impact suit." Crusher coughed, scrambling to her feet. "Hellfire... would you look at this place! Hey, Troi... Dado's going to love you!"

The detention area was totally destroyed within a one metre circumference of the blast point, which actually meant that the bulk of the forcefield control had been physically vaporised. The remainder of its circuits sparked miserably amidst the debris, along with several other fibres and circuits that dangled from those bits of the dividing wall that was still standing.

Troi stood beside Crusher and surveyed what remained of their prison.

"My ears are still ringing," Deanna grumbled softly.

"Hey, you two, stop admiring our handiwork and let's get going before they decide to wake up!"

Evans was picking her way over the wreckage, pulling the Syrene child behind her, and while she urged the two Enterprise officers to go, she indicated the Ferengi guards who were lying stunned amidst the ruins on the other side of the blast's epicentre.

"Hang on." Troi skipped through the remains of the Ferengi detention cell entrance, and relieved their goaders of their phaser weapons as Evans, the Syrene child and Crusher dashed into the corridor, the doors to which had shorted out, leaving a small gap just big enough to squeeze through.

"Looking forward to an encore, Deanna?" Crusher observed, as she saw the two Ferengi phasers in Troi's hand.

The Counselor handed one of the weapons to Evans, and offered the other to Crusher. "Oh no, please. You hang onto that," Beverly said breathlessly as they raced along the corridor. "I can't wait to see where exactly you intend to hide THAT thing!"

She nodded towards the Ferengi device, which to all intents and purposes looked like a small whip, but which they knew could release a deadly bolt of purest energy.

They seemed to run for some time in no particular direction, until they reached a forked corridor, and then the unwelcome sound of Ferengi voices seemed to be coming at them from all directions.

"What now?" Troi looked at Evans.

"Which way?"

"I don't know," Evans answered, gasping for breath. "No idea."

But luckily for them, someone did have an idea. Sabinia ran over to a small access panel and deftly undid it with nimble fingers, wrenching it from the wall and then climbing through the hole. She motioned the Away Team to follow her.

"I'll never get through that!" Crusher exclaimed, looking at the claustrophobically small gap with horror, and then the sound of Ferengi feet running down the corridor towards them made her turn and dive into the access hatchway with the skill of a contortionist. Evans was last in, and she pulled the panel into place just as the Ferengi security detail scurried round the nearest corner and past them towards what remained of Dado's detention area.

"What now?" Troi asked.

"I wish you wouldn't keep saying that," Evans grumbled, "because it means I keep having to say I don't know."

"I suppose we'll just have to follow Sabinia again." Crusher indicated the fast moving form of the Syrene child as she scrambled on her hands and knees along the service tunnel, away from their original access point.

"How does she know where on earth she's going?" Troi muttered, as she scrambled along on all fours behind Crusher.

"Well, she told me before that she had made two bids to escape. This must have been the means by which she made one of them," Evans answered the Counselor.

"And failed," breathed Crusher cautiously. "Where has she gone? Ah, there! Hey, Sabinia, slow down - we're not as small as you are!"

The Away Team crawled on down the access conduits for what seemed like an age, until finally their young Syrene guide stopped to unscrew a screening panel that isolated a duct into a separate part of the Ferengi ship.

"Where are we?" Crusher moaned softly, looking around her at the confining metal alloy of the Ferengi ductwork. "For all we know, we could be right on top of the main engine reactor core!"

"Then I do NOT want to know for sure," Evans replied emphatically.

"Beverly... is there a Ferengi animal class equivalent to Terran arachnids?" Troi's voice trembled only very slightly as she asked the question.

"No, Deanna. You do not want to ask that question right now... but as you just have, it means I am just going to have to ask you - why do you want to know?"

"Because I just felt something brush past my leg."

"Evans - can you see anything?"

"I am NOT looking! No, no way!"

There was a pause that seemed like an age, and then, finally, a thump.

"Hah!" came Beverly's voice. "There!"

"What?" chorused Troi and Evans.

"I've squashed it. Just don't touch the carcass as you come past, whatever you do," Crusher replied. "It's used to produce the drug astrathine, so needless to say it can have a nasty effect on the immune system."

Troi said a very rude word.

"Deanna! If Will Riker knew that was in your vocabulary, he'd be mortified!" Crusher exclaimed with mock shock.

"Well, it was in Will Riker's vocabulary that I first heard it," said Troi in her own defence, "and I feel suitably moved on this occasion to air it."

Finally, thankfully, they moved forward again, downwards this time, towards what they knew not.

"Captain Picard, I would remind you that I have on board three of your crew as my... guests. Your persistent phaser firing could, potentially, cause them - er - harm."

Jean-Luc Picard and William T Riker exchanged wary looks. "Is that a threat, Daimon?" Picard asked silkily, his tone deceptively soft.

"No! No... Captain Picard, you misunderstand me." The Ferengi Daimon was suddenly all oily pretence. "I just wish you to be in no doubt as to the risk you pose to your own people by this..." He paused theatrically, and waved one hand in the air to emphasise his point. "Action."

"All I want, Dado, is my people back!"

"And you will get them back, Picard, safe and sound... I am more than willing to deposit your people at Starbase Lima when we have managed to settle matters here... satisfactorily for all parties concerned."

"You mean the Away Team are your hostages," Riker stated plainly, rarely one to mince his words.

"Let us rather say *insurance*, shall we, Commander?" The Ferengi gave a mirthless, if toothy, grin. "We shall, no doubt, be in contact shortly."

"No doubt," observed Riker with sarcasm.

And with that the transmission was cut. Picard turned in almost a reflex action to the chair on his left, but Counselor Troi was conspicuously absent. So he turned back to his right to intercept Riker's watching gaze, to which Jean-Luc Picard gave a deep sigh and said, "Cease firing phasers, Mr Worf... for now."

Evans released her hold on the deuterium frame of the ventilation shaft and dropped easily down to join the other members of the Away team upon the deck of the shuttlecraft bay. Beverly Crusher was checking the life signs of the lone Ferengi guard they had KO'd with the Ferengi hand weapon, but her shrug as she straightened up from her cursory examination spoke volumes as to her confidence in her diagnosis.

"Well, he seems fairly well stunned," she said, "which is pretty obvious. More than that I cannot really say."

"Curious... that there should be only one guard here when Dado must have known this must surely be our objective on breaking out of his brig," Evans mused, as she made her way over to the control panel to one side of the shuttlebay.

"Curious indeed, Mrs Evans... or should I

perhaps address you as Patricia Mandale... or even Parthenope of Gaea. Now, drop your weapons - all of them!"

BeAn and Haakas stepped out from the shadow of the Enterprise shuttlecraft, Haakas armed with a disruptor which he had trained on the exhausted group before him.

"What the - " Beverly Crusher raised her eyes to the bay ceiling and allowed one small but pithy word to escape the furious set to her lips. To have come so far, then to be greeted by a Romulan welcome committee...

"Leaving so soon? And our transport has yet to arrive, Ladies. I have been granted the honour of returning to Romulus aboard a Warbird of Romulan High Command with my prize... there to commence my research," BeAn told them smugly, "for the glory and the honour of the Empire."

"The Romulans send a Warbird out to collect one little miserable scrap of a child from the neutral zone?" Crusher asked sardonically. "Things a little slow in the Star Empire at present, BeAn?"

BeAn looked at the Doctor hard, his expression one of icy calculation. "You should not be so quick to mock, as need I remind you once more - you are at our mercy. There are of course always many ways to turn disadvantage to advantage. For instance, Dr Crusher, there would be many opportunities for someone like yourself within the hierarchy of the Star Empire... Proven medic, competent administrator, expert xenophysiologist, academic... Should you choose to co-operate, the rewards could prove to be most worthwhile... starting perhaps with the liberation of one of your friends here. Shall I show you how generous I can be in victory? Shall I grant the Betazoid her freedom?"

The echo of BeAn's words seem to hang in the bay with an eerie sense of the bizarre. Deanna glanced, alarmed, at Crusher, unwilling to believe what her empathic senses were telling her. An overwhelming sense of fatality, that Beverly Crusher had apparently concluded that if just one of them could get out of this mess alive to tell the tale, then it could be worth almost any sacrifice.

"Beverly, no."

Crusher stood there within the silence of the Ferengi shuttlebay, noises from the interior of the Oumoc II finally permeating through the closed bay doors, indicating that they would appear to have very little time left for anything.

"Beverly!" This time Troi managed to catch her colleague's eye. "Don't you dare. And it would be futile, for I would not go - and I mean that!"

With a small sigh, Crusher finally looked long into the face of her antagonist. "You may have us, BeAn, but we will bring you nothing but trouble. Is it really worth causing a Federation/Romulan incident over three women and a mere child?" Beverly finally said, her tone flat yet angry.

BeAn regarded Crusher with a somewhat superior gaze. "Oh no. No, no, my dear Dr Crusher, you flatter yourself. The Warbird is not actually here to collect your good selves but to effect the removal of the Syrene delegation from the USS Enterprise, including, I believe, Thelxepia of Achelous, nominated race leader."

"How do you know about that?" Evans asked, her tone icy with fear. "Who could possibly have told you?"

"Oh. I know about many things, Parthenope of Gaea. Your daughter has been a useful source of information for the Empire. It will be a shame to lose her now the game is in its final stages. Motok did his job well."

"But the game is not over yet. The game will never be over as long as there is a single Syrene alive in these galaxies to hunt you down like the cur you are!"

"Captain Picard would never surrender the Syrene to you, BeAn," Crusher said with quiet, deadly assurance. "Never. Whatever the cost, Jean-Luc Picard would never relinquish those people to you."

"Then he has surely signed your respective death warrants," replied BeAn, "and I still have Parthenope of Gaea and the child with whom to resume my studies. I will be most interested to be able to review at first hand the product of Vidor Mandale's work."

"Mandale?" Crusher shook her head. "But all his documented studies were on - "

"No, not his very early work, Dr Crusher.

Oh dear, it would appear that the UFP has been laundering the history books again... albeit at Mandale's own request."

"No!" disagreed Crusher. "That's not poss..."

"No!" Evans regarded BeAn with total horror for what he had suggested. "No. You are wrong. You do not know what you are talking about. You are misinformed."

"No, Madam, I am not." The short figure of BeAn shook his head emphatically, his tone dispassionately callous. "Mandale laid the foundations upon which I, and I alone, will build a Romulan master race of such intellectual prowess and longevity that our match will not be found in a millenia."

Beverly Crusher cocked her head to one side at these words before saying coolly, "I don't think so." She paced slowly towards BeAn, and then stopped. "Because once this gets out, Romulan credibility amongst non-Romulan and non-Federation aligned advanced worlds is going to make space pretty uncomfortable for the Empire for some time. And the Romulan Empire may fancy taking on the whole of the known galaxies, but I wonder how long that would last - war has its price even for a 'master race'."

She turned to Haakas, who had been standing silently behind the Romulan geneticist, watching herself and Evans with his hooded gaze.

"The best way to end this is to let us return to the Enterprise, deny the Syrene to BeAn. Once their amazing secrets are out, it will simply be impossible for him and his supporters to continue this work without the universal condemnation and censure it so richly deserves. And I am sure one of the very first to act will be the Romulans themselves - their honour and credibility amongst non-aligned civilizations demands it! Do anything else, and it will stop nothing. Those in favour of this work will simply find themselves another BeAn and carry on his work under that marvellous cloak of secrecy, a cloak that you will have helped to maintain."

Crusher paused, looking hard at the austere face of the Romulan before her, his features hard as if they were hewn from granite, his attitude betraying no strain of thought, no evidence to his indecision or lack of it. His dark gaze seemed to burn into her countenance for what seemed an age, and then he glanced briefly

at the small figure sitting within the open door of the Enterprise shuttlecraft Tiberius, patiently awaiting her liberation. Beverly saw the brief flash of pain in his eyes before he moved his gaze and altered the aim of the disruptor, saying in his quiet, accented voice, "You must return to the Enterprise now. Sthea'hwill. Go, women of lloann'mhrahel."

EIGHT

The stillness of the Captain's Ready Room seemed far from the activities associated with the red alert status obvious on the main Bridge. Commander Riker and Captain Picard had withdrawn for a few moments to contemplate the present situation and consider their next move.

Picard sat at his desk, his face grim as he watched his exhausted First Officer sink into the facing chair with a sigh of fatigue, a grey look of tiredness on his face.

"Will, I would understand if you felt the need to take some well-earned rest. Put to sleep, forcibly wakened and then dropped into an encounter situation... It's enough to knock the stuffing out of any one of us."

"I'm not going anywhere until we've finally got ourselves out of this damned mess!" Riker responded, adding as an afterthought, "sir."

"An admirable objective, Number One... and this situation is proving to be something of a Gordian knot."

"Do you think you could have handled it any differently, Captain?"

Picard threw a wry look at his First Officer, wondering if Will Riker was trying to say HE would have.

"No. Given what the situation was when we resumed command, I do not think so. Not that I agree or disagree with the decisions made by Commander Data and his temporary Bridge relief - only they truly know what factors were in play AT THAT TIME, given the condition of the Enterprise and the options available to them. After all, we now have the benefit of hindsight. I stand by the decisions made, both theirs and mine, but concerning the Away Team... Well, a brave act is not necessarily a wise one."

Jean-Luc Picard leaned back in his chair,

and rubbed his eyes briefly, releasing a deep sigh as he did so. "I keep reminding myself - correction, I HAVE to keep reminding myself - that the Away Team on the Oumoc II is composed of seasoned members of my staff as well as resourceful Starfleet personnel. We were damned lucky that they were around at all... and unaffected."

"Thanks to their attendance of the Yrice," Riker pointed out, "although I think I would have included Lt Worf in the Away Team had it been composed under more normal conditions."

"Muscle, Number One?"

"Numbers, Captain. Three is hardly sufficient to watch each others' backs, even if they were armed."

"But as far as we know, they are probably not by now. Lord knows what the situation is over there!"

Picard rubbed the back of his head before looking across at Riker. "And all I have been able to think of since I woke up in the middle of this nightmare is, what the hell am I going to tell Wesley? God forbid I have to tell him anything at all. And the prospect of living with the knowledge that the last thing I told his mother to do was to get on with her job and save my ship!"

Riker's answer was lost in a sudden hail.

"Captain!" Data's voice carried an uncharacteristic note of urgency. "A vessel consistent with the specifications of the shuttlecraft has emerged at great speed from within the shield area of the Oumoc II."

"Positive identification, Data?" Picard snapped out instantly, on his feet and out of his ready room so quickly he was able to receive his answer in person from the android officer sitting at Ops.

"It is the Enterprise shuttle Tiberius, sir." Data's hands moved nimbly across the ops console. "Sensors indicate life signs to be four."

"The Tiberius is requesting urgent assistance from the Enterprise, audio only," Worf rumbled from the rear of the Bridge. "The message states they anticipate potential aggressive retaliation from other ships within the vicinity."

"Audio only? No visual?"

Picard glanced at Riker, who shook his head and said, "Suspicious."

"Open hailing frequencies to the craft, Mr Worf, audio message," Picard snapped out.

"Audio, sir."

"This is the USS Enterprise. Occupants of shuttle Tiberius, please identify yourselves."

There was a crackle or static as the channels were opened for a response. Riker shot a concerned look at his Captain, who took a deep breath. "I repeat. This is the USS..."

"Jean-Luc Picard," came an all too familiar voice, "what the hell are you waiting for...?"

The transmission was cut abruptly, replaced by the droning whine of nullified subspace.

"Sir." Data's voice cut clearly through the discrete buzz of consternation on the Enterprise Bridge. "It would appear that the Oumoc II is attempting to get a fix on the shuttle Tiberius, using its powerful tractor beam facility. The activated field generated by the beam is rendering subspace communication impossible."

"Data, what are the chances of them being successful?" Commander Riker asked urgently.

"Without a better understanding of the technology the Ferengi are currently using, Commander, unknown. However, should they prove successful, the ability of the Enterprise to transport the Away Team back with predictable results could be seriously impaired."

"Worf!" Captain Picard strode towards his command chair, his shoulders rigid, his back ramrod straight. "Sound general quarters, full red alert - battlestations."

"Aye, sir," the Klingon officer acknowledged promptly.

"Ensign, lay in an intercept course for the shuttle Tiberius," Picard instructed. "Let's make sure we get to them before the Ferengi do."

"Or the Romulans, sir," Riker reminded him quietly, as he sat down in his chair to the Captain's right.

"Indeed, Number One," Picard nodded, raising one eyebrow somewhat sardonically. "Let

us not forget the Romulans."

The motion of spacecraft could occasionally make one feel quite ill, particularly if it was small, most particularly if it was going fast. But Deanna Troi could quite honestly say she had never been subjected to a passage through space quite like this one. An alarmed, speedily revived Ferengi operative had been 'coerced' into reversing the beam system of the Oumoc II - and somewhat clumsily by all accounts, as the reversed tractor beam had hurled them out of the Ferengi ship at a horrific speed as if from a high tech slingshot. At first it was just a relief to escape the Ferengi craft, but that was quickly replaced by the realisation that the shuttle was not built for the kind of velocity it had been expelled at.

Troi sat in the rear of the shuttle, holding Sabinia tightly by the shoulders as the inquisitive Syrene child, appearing totally unfazed by the drama of the moment, was far more interested in standing as close to the helm as possible. She could only marvel at the child's resilience; the groaning shaking structure of the shuttlecraft was terrifying - even Troi could see the craft was on the verge of barrelling out of control, the forces of momentum easily overcoming its reverse thrusters.

"It's no good - if I keep them on any longer, I'll simply burn them out!" yelled Evans over the top of the computer warning announcement. "We are just going to have to try and ride it out."

"Warning - present velocity is in excess of documented safety limits. Warning..."

"I know! I know! Beverly, switch that damned noise off!" Evans shouted, glancing sideways to where Beverly Crusher had been hailing the Enterprise. Crusher moved her attention from the communications equipment and proceeded to study the control panel as if it were a particularly tasty box of comfits.

"Beverly - just hit anything, but hurry. Try the one on the left, or the one next to it - but quick!"

Crusher, in fact, had to hit two fields to the left of the console before the annoying computer alert finally halted and they were left with the comparative silence of three emergency alarms and the sound of the shuttle itself groaning under the stress of its own momentum.

"The Ferengi are closing fast," Evans reported, her hands skittering over the helm with an almost familiar ease. "This is going to be one of THE shortest escape attempts on record!"

Crusher started scanning the controls as well as the view out of the shuttle port for clues as to the position of the USS Enterprise.

"What's that?" Beverly indicated a large mass moving into range on the navigation scope.

"Asteroid field. Quite a big one... luckily we've got just enough room to get round it..."

"Then how about changing course to directly for it?"

"Change course? Are you mad? At this speed it's highly questionable as to whether it's within the on-board navigational computers' capacity to get us through that in one piece. We would have to do it manually, and frankly I don't think my reactions are good enough!"

"But we are small - the Oumoc is not. We're desperate. The Ferengi are greedy; would they think it 'profitable' to risk the Oumoc II?"

"No... but once within the field of the cluster, there'll be all manner of stellar debris, and the shuttle's minimal shields may not be sufficient. We would need to make constant course corrections, and the gravitational pull of the larger asteroids -"

"If you have any better ideas, now would be a good time to air them," came Troi's voice from directly behind the helm position. "I for one think Beverly's option is about the best one we are going to get."

With a sigh, Evans afforded the Counselor a short, irritated look. "I hate decisions by committee," she muttered sourly. "OK, changing course for the main asteroid cluster now, estimated entry... -30, -29, -28... I'm going to need your help on the Conn, Beverly - as soon as anything too big for the shields to handle turns up, sing out!... -14, -13, -12, -11... entering cluster fringes now."

Evans continued her precise countdown as Crusher sat with her eyes glued to the external sensor display screen.

"...point 55 255 mark 10," Beverly Crusher called out, her voice cool, her ability to hold her wits about her in a crisis a blessing.

"Course correction input... compensating," Evans reported as the shuttle swung away from that obstacle, only to be bearing down almost instantly on another.

"Point 137 535 mark 00!" Crusher reported promptly.

"Input. Compensating." Somewhat anxiously, Evans checked the switches above her head and down on her console again. "Come on, Enterprise, come on. We've not got a lot of time here!" Evans murmured to herself.

"Another rock coming up - 000 point 002 mark 01." Beverly shook her head. "This would be a hellish lot easier if we were going a bit slower."

"Compensating... Perhaps it will not be so bad if we keep to the fringes," Evans suggested, her calm voice bellying the fact the shuttle was literally screaming through the cluster. Then Beverly felt Deanna clutch the back of her chair with an iron grip, and heard the catch in Counselor Troi's breath.

"Deanna?" She could only afford the briefest of glances towards Troi, but that was all she needed. Deanna Troi was staring, aghast, out of the forward shuttle port.

"Merde!" Crusher spun back to her controls as she took in what had horrified the woman behind her. "Evans, Romulan Warbird uncloaking, starboard side!" she shouted almost by reflex.

Evans swore long and hard, her patience obviously at its limits

"That Warbird will be able to pick us out of here like fruit from a tree once they manage to lock transporters onto our signals."

"Asteroid - bearing 000 point 450 mark 05."

"Dammit - I'm taking us deeper in," Evans said bluntly. "Course correction inputting now. Lets see if these vultures consider it worth gambling their ships on this game!"

"Captain, Romulan vessel is uncloaking to starboard, distance, one parsec from the Enterprise. The shuttle has changed course to heading 270 mark 015, straight for the centre of the asteroid field."

"They are doing their level best to lose them," Picard said, a clear note of undisguised admiration in his voice. "A courageous manoeuvre."

"But at what cost, sir? The debris bouncing off the other ships' deflectors is making this game of chase incredibly risky," Riker pointed out. "We've already had to divert power to the main shields to prevent serious damage by some of the larger pieces. One is all it's going to take, just one of those oversized pebbles that is a little TOO big, and we're going to end up with a hull breach on our hands."

As if to emphasise his words, the computer burst into audible life. "Warning, Object beyond deflector capacity to port side. Warning..."

"Ops, turn that off," Riker said. "I think we are well aware of the objects about us at the moment."

"Mr La Forge?"

Geordi had just transferred engineering control to the Bridge, and was in the process of checking shield and deflector status.

"The Commander is right, Captain. And even if we get to within transporter range, it would be sheer suicide to drop the shields, even long enough to get the Away Team back on board!"

"Sir." Data had been standing by Geordi's side, observing output from one of the science stations. "If the shuttle maintains its present course and speed, there is a less than 23% probability that they can survive the next twenty minutes without collision."

"What is the probability of them surviving the next ten, Data?" the Captain questioned sharply.

"69.5%, sir."

Commander Riker looked across at Captain Picard. "We've got to think of something - and fast, Captain."

"Agreed, Number One."

Picard moved to the rear science station occupied by Data and looked over the android's shoulder to where Data was calling up information on the asteroid field, composition of

the planetesimals and mapping their distribution within the present sector of space.

"Ironic," Picard observed as he frowned down at the computerized display. "As much as I was looking forward to encountering an interesting collection of captive asteroids, I had not anticipated discovering them on the edge of the Dorsan Dwarf Star System."

"You are correct in surmising this to be part of a belt of captive asteroids, Captain," Data said. "As you know, captive, otherwise known as Trojan, asteroids can orbit in horseshoe shaped paths that take them toward a planet, then after an abrupt course reversal, away from the planet over a cycle lasting hundreds of years. In theory, most Trojans should congregate at the 2 Lagrangian points in the orbit of a planet. In this case..."

He indicated the star map on the display to his left. "Probably this planet, here, on the outer reaches of the Dorsan Dwarf System, which is on the fringe of the neutral zone and Federation space."

"Is there any way around this, Data?" Riker asked.

"The asteroids are numerous and well distributed, their orbit is stable, but many of the Trojans nearer the shuttle are too big for the Enterprise to simply knock out of the way."

"Could we warp round the asteroids and get ahead of the shuttle?" Geordi asked suddenly. "Then we could sit and wait for the shuttle to come to us, and without the debris associated with the other ships in pursuit, it would be possible to beam the Away Team back with a lower degree of associated risk."

"The distances involved are considerable, and would take us clearly into the neutral zone should we attempt to circumnavigate the belt, Captain," Data pointed out.

"What about the Lagrangian points? Surely there will be a lesser concentration beyond that point due to the effect of the planet," Riker asked with some urgency.

"That may be correct, Number One." Picard agreed, "but it would mean taking the Enterprise, at speed, through the space between the Lagrangian point and as close as we dare to the planet itself. And there are no guarantees!"

Picard mused over the evidence before him. "Shuttle status, Mr Data?" He asked.

"It appears to be slowing somewhat towards the centre of the visible cluster, probably due to the gravitational effects of the larger bodies. The Ferengi vessel is gaining on them considerably as a result."

Picard looked briefly at Commander Riker, who said simply, "I think our options have just run out, Captain."

"The Ferengi are right on our tails. Sheesh, I can almost smell them," Crusher insisted. "And there is another damn asteroid - bearing 005 point 000 mark 015."

"Ok... I don't think we can keep this up. The shuttle has slowed, but it is starting to swing really weirdly in response to course corrections. It must be the gravitational pull of those stupid rocks!"

Evans battled with the controls for a few moments, the shuttle yawing and pitching before she released her held breath. "Are you all strapped in back there?"

"You are joking!" was Troi's response. "Are we really likely to be anything else?"

"Bearing 025 point 222 mark 00." Then Beverly Crusher froze, her voice ice tinged with controlled panic, slightly higher in note than usual. "Correction - bearing 001 point 180... Evans, the Oumoc's on top of us!"

The shuttle suddenly was wrenched one way, and then the other, with great violence. Something in the rear of the Tiberius crashed down, and another chorus of alarms chimed into life.

"God, those Ferengi are persistent little devils!" Crusher snapped, bracing herself against the helm with dogged determination. "What in hell's name are they trying to do?"

"Making sure if they don't get us, no-one does..." Evans started.

The Tiberius shook even more violently the second time, and worse still started to rock savagely from side to side from the effects of the misdirected Ferengi tractor beam, like an out of control pendulum.

"Warning. Stabilizers are non-functional.
Warning. Stabilisers are non-functional.
Warning..."

That damn computer voice again, and not a thing they could do about it as the shuttle started to rock, and then spiral into a spin.

"That's it, stabilizers gone. Emergency backups failed. It's too much!" cried out Evans. "We cannot possibly keep level... Oh Hell - here we gooooo..."

And the shuttle finally careered out of control, spinning manically on its axis towards the largest of the Trojans the crew of the Tiberius had encountered in their dash for freedom so far.

"Energize!"

"But Captain..."

"I said energize, Chief, now! There are no other options - just do it!"

The Bridge crew watched, hypnotised by the dizzy progress of the shuttle, on and on and on until the Tiberius ploughed into the large planetesimal within their sights, exploding with a glorious report of light; white and yellow tinged with orange. The blast scattered the orbital debris accompanying the captive belt of asteroids.

"Chief?" Picard was on his feet, his face fixed on the main viewer, grey. "Have we got them?"

There was a pause in Chief O'Brien's reply - in reality only a moment, but to those on the Bridge it felt like a lifetime.

"The shields, Captain!" Riker croaked. "The debris from the blast is due to hit at any moment!"

"O'Brien?" Picard barked.

Another one of those pauses, until finally, "We've got them, Sir." O'Brien's voice rang with relief.

"Shields up!" Riker rapped out instantaneously.

"Report, Chief O'Brien. Why the delay?" Picard demanded somewhat shortly.

"Due to the interference from the field of the Oumoc II's tractor beam and the disorientation of the shuttlecraft, we firstly had problems getting a decent lock on their signals and then they materialized forty six centimetres above the transporter pad!"

Riker blinked slowly. "What is their condition, Chief?"

"Just badly winded, sir. Lt Worf has already alerted sickbay."

"Can they walk, Chief O'Brien?"

"Well... Yes, sir, I think they can." The Chief sounded surprised.

"Then I want them up on the Bridge now. And I mean NOW. That's an order."

"Ensign, set a course back into clear Federation space - close to our original co-ordinates should do. Commander -" Picard turned to Riker - "I want you to go down to the transporter room and make sure the Away Team gets up here straight away."

"Captain?" Riker looked towards Picard, his gaze questioning.

"I have had enough of these ludicrous games, Number One," Jean-Luc Picard stated, his acid tone hinting at his intense anger at the chain of events and the risk to his crew. "It is about time that someone called a halt to this ridiculous situation. I have had it up to here..." he indicated a point somewhere near the top of his head... "With Ferengi posturing and Romulan superior attitudes. So now I hold the trump cards, let's see if everyone is a little more communicative once they have seen them!"

"Aye, sir. Open hailing frequencies." Riker nodded his agreement and voiced the command. "Signal the Ferengi and Romulan vessels immediately."

"Aye, Commander," came the prompt response.

Dr Beverly Crusher followed Patricia Evans, Dearuna Troi and Sabinia down towards Bridge Turbolift One. They were a bedraggled but defiant group as they met Commander Riker, covered from head to foot in evidence of their adventure - from Ferengi air duct grime to the

dust of the gutted detention cell, every uniform told its own story.

Commander Riker was talking to one of the security teams as he turned to address the recently arrived party. "Captain Picard is urgently awaiting you on the Bridge..." Then Will Riker took a GOOD look at the Away Team for the first time since he had seen them prior to this whole escapade.

"Oh, my..." he breathed, the indefatigable Riker grin starting to stretch, almost indefinitely, from ear to ear. And then, as other personnel in the corridor slowly came to a standstill, he shepherded them into the turbolift, one mercurial eyebrow twitching upwards.

"So that's why the Ferengi never came looking for a commanding officer." He grinned infectiously. "Hot damn, but it's difficult to keep you Crushers out of the line of command... and Deanna, or should I say Commander Troi, Counselor? ...Bridge!" He instructed the turbolift, remembering his commission.

"Will, if you persist in being such a revolting tease, I will not say how wonderful it is to be back." But an irrepressible smile broke through as she said it, and the empath touched his arm. But only Beverly saw Will Riker discreetly move his own larger hand to cover hers and give it a relieved squeeze.

"It's great to have you back... it's great to have you all back," he amended quickly, a wicked twinkle in his eyes, then turning his attention to the Syrene child, he said with some politeness, "and who might you be?"

"This is Sabinia," Patricia informed the First Officer. "She does not say a lot, at least in ways that can be interpreted by the universal translators."

Will Riker looked down at the diminutive Syrene person before him and solemnly extended a hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Sabinia. My name is William T Riker, and I'm First Officer of the USS Enterprise."

Sabinia stared considerably up at the First Officer's considerable height, and looked long and hard at his handsome bearded face before extending her own small hand with no little dignity.

"I think she likes you," Deanna Troi observed, as the First Officer and Syrene child shook on it.

It was at this point that the turbolift arrived at its Bridge destination, and the doors hissed back to allow access to the nerve centre of the Enterprise.

"Exactly what do you mean by that statement, Tomolok?"

Picard's voice was cutting the air with an incisive edge as he directed his question at the main viewscreen of the Bridge.

"What I said, Captain Picard. We Romulans condemn all dealings BeAn has had in this matter with the Ferengi known as Daimon Dado - his actions have been somewhat lacking in... honour."

"And that is all it is to you? You regard an act of attempted genocide as a crime of honour?"

"It is enough." Tomolok's tone was disagreeable. "And at least we consider it a crime. The Federation's treatment of this race has been hardly exemplary."

It was at this point that Crusher noticed Haakas standing at the Romulan Warbird Commander's side, the tall austere Romulan showing no flicker of recognition at the sight of the Away Team. However, Beverly wondered if she was the only one who noticed how his sharp eyes immediately sought out the tiny figure clinging somewhat tenaciously to the fabric of the trouser leg of Evans' uniform.

"Then there is also the matter of the Romulan scoutship blatantly impinging on Federation borders with the neutral zone," Picard pointed out, his persistent tone firm, his attention focussed on Tomolok's response.

"Captain Picard." The Romulan Commander's tone was insolently slow as if trying to impress an important point on an individual with a less than full complement of wits about him. "I have already stated that the crew of the scoutship was not acting upon the agreed orders of the Romulan High Command, therefore we will not be held accountable for any acts they may have subsequently undertaken."

"Do you believe him?" Riker asked his Captain in the lowest of undertones.

"Have I much choice?" Picard replied, answering a question with another question, before raising his voice to address the Romulan Warbird Commander.

"Then we have no choice other than to trust you to deal with them as you see fit."

"Indeed. The ship is already returning to Romulan space under the command of subcommander Motok."

"Motok!" Riker exclaimed. "For some reason that knowledge does not inspire me with great confidence in Romulan justice!"

"And why do you say that, Commander?" Tomolok asked, his voice silky smooth, his face totally devoid of all expression.

"We have information that implicates Motok in this matter right from the start," Picard stated with conviction. "His subsequent presence in such a capacity does make the likelihood of Romulan involvement in this matter a serious question - particularly as the Syrene are about to be granted full, independent race status by the Federation."

"Really?" The Commander's voice was ice cold. "Then be thankful that you have retrieved your Away Team, Captain Picard... and kept your ship this day."

The Romulan Commander sat back imperiously at his post. "So. We have talked enough. I will inform you that you have fifteen of your Earth minutes to get that Ferengi vessel out of the neutral zone, else we will blow both it and the Enterprise onto the far side of this star system."

"I will not waste time reminding you that it is your ship, not mine, that is at present sitting in the neutral zone, Tomolok. I have just had word that the Federation starships Essex and Krieger are on their way to help me address that problem, if need be." Picard crossed his arms across his chest, before continuing. "And on the other matter. Heed me well, Tomolok, when I say that I personally will make sure that the attempts uncovered here to exploit a potentially vulnerable race are going to be made as public as we can make them - and if one supported lead is uncovered that indicates Romulan intervention in such a matter... Well, I am sure such an 'honourable' race as the Romulans, and such a diplomat as yourself, needs no further indication of the possible consequences for your Star

Empire - the nature of intergalactic politics is a matter of record. Particularly with respect to acts of genocide."

"Fifteen minutes, Picard! Out!"

Jean-Luc Picard turned slowly to look at his First Officer, who had come to stand by his side during the final stages of the interview.

"He sounds serious, Captain," Riker warned.

"And so am I, Number One," Picard replied. "As for Tomolok, I think he is a trifle disappointed he did not get to claim the big prize today... and that is thanks, in part, to our Away Team."

Picard spun on his heel and started to pace back across the Bridge. The recently arrived group stood in his path, having watched his discussion with the Romulan Warbird Commander with some interest. Picard was consulting a PADD with Commander Riker at his side as he walked towards them. Picard actually only looking up at the Away Team when he was virtually on top of them, a smile of welcome already on his face.

It froze there, as if pasted on, the Captain seeming almost to stop in mid stride before slowly, inexorably, studying every detail of those before him.

"Captain." Beverly Crusher refused to fix her commanding officer with anything other than a defiant gaze, reluctant to feel in any way at a disadvantage over her present appearance. It was the Captain, after all, who had insisted that they report immediately to the Bridge, and then had sent Commander Riker down to fetch them as if they could not be relied on to obey an order. So just let him criticize the state of her uniform.

"Reporting as ordered, sir."

Then Beverly Crusher swallowed hard as she recalled it was not actually, technically, her uniform. Particularly as she caught Captain Picard's hard gaze studying her all too familiar colours, complete with scorch marks from a circuit fire from the dying moments of the Tiberius, a good smearing of Ferengi ventilation shaft dirt, a liberal dusting of whitish alloy powder and a suspect purplish stain on one elbow.

"Doctor."

It was neither statement, greeting nor question - and most unnervingly of all, the icy formal tone was directed more towards the damn uniform than Beverly Crusher herself, she thought with embarrassed fury.

Beverly felt herself start to flush red, very red. It started behind her ears and spread rapidly across her cheeks.

"Captain." The set of her chin was mulish, her eyes sparking angry fire at Jean-Luc Picard's implicit criticism of her attire without first divining the facts of the matter, particularly as none of this had been her idea in the first place.

"I can explain," she stated simply.

"That, I am counting on, Dr Crusher," Picard responded curtly, tugging at the top of his own uniform before crossing his arms on his chest. "You will report to my Ready Room as soon as this incident is over and do just that. Do I make myself clear, Doctor?"

"Perfectly, Captain."

The Bridge froze. Riker threw a glance of enquiry towards Troi, before they took a mutually supportive step towards the Chief Medical Officer, but Worf beat them to it.

"The Oumoc II is hailing us, sir," he reported clearly. "Daimon Dado wishes to speak."

Picard took one last long look at his ruined uniform before spinning on his heel, his expression set. "Put it on the main viewscreen, Mr Worf."

The large cranial expanse of Dado's head bobbed into view, the squat nose and rows of irregular teeth seeming too big for his mouth, all too typical of Ferengi facial characteristics.

"What have you said to the Romulans, Picard? They have blatantly threatened my ship if I do not leave the neutral zone. I demand you act! The Ferengi..."

"Appear only to mind the Federation when it suits them," Picard bit out, "and on this rare occasion, I agree with the Romulans. I want you out of the neutral zone and into Federation space - now."

"I protest, Picard. And I will protest to the highest authorities! I, Daimon Dado, will not be

treated in this cavalier manner!"

"Well, Dado, as for you, I wonder how far the Ferengi will be prepared to support your consequence now that your activities have been exposed to the full glare of attention by the Federation?"

Picard had obviously struck a nerve, as Dado's face turned briefly ugly, a look quickly, skilfully, covered by a thin veneer of mere unpleasantness.

"Do not underestimate me, Picard," he finally said, the normal guttural Ferengi tones oily smooth. "Many have in the past, and have lived to regret it ...later."

"Indeed. Well, far from underestimating you, I am going to see to it that the authorities are made aware of your activities in this matter and involvement in other related incidents. In short, I will be advising Starfleet that a warrant be issued for your arrest - UFP criminal code, section A, paragraph - "

"You would not dare!" the Ferengi spluttered, outraged.

Picard simply continued to regard the Daimon impassively, as the Ferengi cast his gaze about the impassive faces of the Enterprise command crew for some evidence of lack of resolve.

"Commander Riker! You seem a most reasonable man. Surely you can see that what your Captain proposes - "

"Is an ideal solution to a very awkward problem. You should find any future negotiations, legal or illegal, somewhat difficult to undertake in Federation space with a warrant for your arrest hanging over your head," observed Riker. "Of course there are those non-aligned worlds where the only thing that you would have to worry about would be the risk from professional bounty hunters keen to finally act on one of those 92 contracts that I believe exist on your life."

"I will NOT forget this, Picard," hissed Dado, looking from the stern face of Picard to the mildly amused one of Commander Riker. "I will have you both for this!"

"Shall I add him to the list, sir?" Riker asked, his face poker straight.

"Why not, Number One," Picard responded, finally turning his attention back to the Away Team. "And Dado, as you can see, with plausible witnesses for the UFP including their own Emissary and two of my officers, I do not expect a great delay in this warrant being issued."

Daimon Dado regarded the Bridge crew with loathing. "Until next time, Enterprise!" he snarled, and with that transmission from the Oumoc II was cut abruptly.

"Sir, sensors indicate the Oumoc II is powering to levels consistent for warp speed," Data informed them from the Ops position.

"Prepare to pursue the Ferengi ship, Mr Data," Riker ordered immediately.

"Belay that order," Picard responded quickly.

"But Captain - "

"Commander - Starfleet has requested that we remain here to ensure the local border with the neutral zone at this point is secure, before proceeding with our mission to Starbase Lima."

Seeing his First Officer's frustration at the vagaries of Starfleet, he allowed himself a small smile in sympathy with Will Riker's obvious disappointment.

"Others will have to chase the Oumoc II for now, Number One, probably the Essex and the Krieger. We, however, have other Starfleet duties to perform."

Captain's Log Stardate 50421.5: The Enterprise has finally completed its duties at Starbase Lima and is preparing to depart from the Starbase within the hour. The Syrene delegation has departed with evident relief, uncomfortable with being aboard a Starship where their most taboo subjects for discussion are general knowledge. And it was with some sadness that the crew bade farewell to Patricia Evans. Her part in saving my ship will not be forgotten by either Starfleet or myself.

Dr Beverly Crusher sat upon one of the

large, comfortable seats in the Captain's Ready Room, cradling her lemon tea in her hand as she catalogued the rather mixed set of results from their recently completed mission.

"The most unfortunate thing is that the entire episode has emphasized Aglaopheme of Sterope's fears about knowledge of Syrene physiology being used against them."

"But the Emissary made it clear that she believed Syrene isolation, and ignorance of the race in general, was the major factor. Their individual vulnerability if they insist on maintaining their cloak of secrecy is indisputable," Picard pointed out, moving to perch on the edge of his desk, his face puzzled. "But I could not, in all clear conscience, act as an advocate for the assimilation proposal. Their culture should glory in its differences, not be wiped out because of them."

"Yes, you were quite vocal on that point, Jean-Luc," Beverly observed.

Picard shot her a cryptic look.

"Well, the fact remains that they decided to refuse assimilation... maybe they got what they wanted after all," Beverly Crusher mused quietly to herself. "Enough attention to prove themselves worthy of interest without the responsibility of provoking that interest in the first place. Maybe agreeing to the assimilation was their way of letting out a cry for help?"

"And they have full race status within the Federation," Picard pointed out dryly. "A convenient and very pleasant little extra resulting from the inconvenience of the assimilation study."

"True - although I think the hard core of the Syrene would have preferred to maintain their silence and continue their own twilight existence of tracking and protecting their race. They will have to find other challenges now, although I believe Pisinoe and Aglaopheme have departed already, hot on the trail of Dado. And Patricia has certainly got her work cut out with the erstwhile Lucy."

Beverly stared down at her lemon tea, playing with the slice of lemon bobbing in its depths. "However, they do seem most appreciative of full race status. So much so in fact, that Thelxepia has agreed that information already in possession of the Federation can be released to member worlds of the UFP."

"An interesting decision."

"And not quite as altruistic as it sounds, Captain. I think Pisinoe has convinced Thelxepia that the revelations uncovered by the crew of the Enterprise may also help other Syrene, spread as they are about the known galaxies. Thelxepia is anticipating a deluge of angry complaints." Beverly smiled in recollection of the Syrene Elder's exact words. "Possibly even a challenge to her leadership, but she says the time has come to change some of the old ways. Not all of them, but some. At least they seem to have realised it is simply not enough to rely on the Romulan disgrace with the issue of BeAn to keep the matter quiet, allowing them to carry on exactly as before."

"But surely that decision has already eroded aspects of their culture. Its confidentiality was an integral part of its structure and fibre," Picard objected. "Much of the Syrene culture appears keyed to surviving in the face of adversity after all."

"I think there's much about the Syrene that will never be told, Captain. In my humble opinion they have so many secrets, they can afford to spill a few. And they are still at risk, maybe more so now than ever. Once the study done has been further researched and published, the revelations it holds will be enough to have every Syrene in the known galaxies under scrutiny."

"So their decisions may still not be the right ones, Doctor," Picard said finally. "At least they are now a recognized race, and with representatives within the UFP at least they will always have a voice."

"Let's hope there is always someone prepared to listen." Beverly Crusher smiled hesitantly. "I hope that proves enough."

"And what of you?"

"Of me?" Beverly Crusher looked somewhat surprised as she regarded Jean-Luc Picard with startled eyes.

Captain Picard cleared his throat somewhat self-consciously and leaned back against his desk, glancing briefly at the ceiling of his office, before he looked back at his Chief Medical Officer sitting bolt upright on one of the Ready Room's more comfortable chairs.

"We have been somewhat at loggerheads

over a number of issues recently. We seem to have argued more over the past few weeks than in more years than I care to remember at the moment."

"I know, Jean-Luc," Beverly admitted ruefully, "and I apologise. I've been working a few things through, and I think that on a few occasions I've been using you as the beating board."

"You don't have to tell ME that." His tone was exasperated. "And I'm sorry too. I am sorry that I maybe do not listen. I'm sorry that sometimes I haven't got the time to explain WHY I have made certain decisions." He moved to sit beside her, his face concerned as he held her gaze. "I'm not the enemy, Beverly."

No, he wasn't the enemy. If she could only work out exactly who or what he was, then maybe she could lay to rest some part of her restlessness, forget the insecurity, the guilt associated with Jack and feel like a whole person again.

"I know." She met the perceptive, hazel gaze for a long moment. "It's just sometimes I get so tired of fighting so damned hard for what I want."

"You surprise me," Picard reflected with some humour. "In fact you've always struck me as a very determined lady indeed. And others, too, it would appear... Word has reached me that you have been offered a singular honour, along with Counselor Troi, an honour only once before extended to 'outsiders'."

"Ah yes... Well, I think I was one of many on a very long list of potential Syrene Guardians. Although I do understand that just being nominated means you are granted perks such as access to Syrene soothsayers and other potentially useful services, like, I believe, Orion trained assassins."

"I'll bear that in mind!" was Picard's sardonic response. "And were you tempted, Beverly?"

"Was I tempted? Yes, I can honestly say I WAS tempted, Jean-Luc. As Syrene Guardian, I would no longer be an 'outsider', I would be on the inside. The first Starfleet-trained Doctor to have access to their race. As an explorer, Jean-Luc, you must know how tempting such a prospect for discovery is!" She smiled. "However, Starfleet medical, for all its warts and

occasional silly administrative politics, is the place I want to stay for now. Most particularly in charge of my sickbay on board this ship. And, as you were no doubt going to remind me, Captain, I can only owe true allegiance to one organization - and as before, my loyalty is to Starfleet, and you, Captain Jean-Luc Picard."

Beverly Crusher looked at Picard for but a moment. The look was supposed to convey her heartfelt conviction in what she had just said; but for that brief, exceptional moment she found herself looking into the face not of Captain Picard, commanding officer of the Starship Enterprise, but of Picard the man.

When she had reported to the Captain's Ready Room after the escape from the Oumoc II, Beverly Crusher had seriously thought she was about to become the first CMO murdered by their Captain for impersonating a senior line officer. But he had sat behind his desk, cleared his throat, sat forward, then sat back in his chair, had thanked her for her part in saving his ship, then dismissed her. All these years she had known Jean-Luc Picard, and still he had the capacity to surprise her.

He was now smiling at her earlier words, his clear, intelligent eyes easily holding her own.

"Well, I must say I am relieved to hear that," Picard said.

Beverly blinked slowly, for the air in the Ready Room seemed to have suddenly become charged with tension; and she did not have to be CMO to notice her pulse scuttle and her mouth feel dry.

"And I have a request to make of you..." He reached out to remove a speck of dust from the shoulder of her uniform, the gesture so unexpected, so innocent, that it was almost seductive.

Beverly swallowed, cursing herself for reacting like an adolescent schoolgirl to this surely, purely platonic gesture. "Um... you... you do?" she stuttered.

And then the door buzzer sounded.

Abruptly, Beverly stood, looking uncomfortable and not a little awkward, her tea cup still in her hand.

"Doctor." The Captain stood also, and when Dr Crusher seemed predisposed to fiddle

with her cup, removed it firmly from her grasp and set it down on the desk before placing his hands on her shoulders.

"Doctor... Beverly," he continued in a softer tone, his low cultured voice almost hypnotic. "Will you promise me that before you decide to wash your hands of Starfleet, ever, you will come and discuss it with me first? I rarely ask anything of those people who are... of some account to me, but I do ask this of you."

Beverly swallowed convulsively, acknowledging yet again that Jean-Luc Picard's personality could be as beguiling as it was powerful. Its effect at close proximity was not unlike being exposed to a generous dose of the notorious drug astrathine and Beverly Crusher felt a slight smile starting to tug at the corners of her mouth, and found the temptation to delay irresistible.

"Come, Beverly, nothing less than your word. Do I have your promise?"

The door comm chirruped yet again, and ever the master strategist and tactician, Picard called out, "Come!" before repeating to her, "Your word, Beverly?"

Riker and Data strode in, but Commander Riker, astutely perceiving what appeared to be an interruption of a somewhat intimate moment, stopped immediately, barely a step off the threshold of the Ready Room door. Unfortunately, Data took somewhat longer to discern the nuance of the moment, and cannoned straight into the First Officer from behind.

"Okay, okay. Yes, yes, yes!" Dr Crusher agreed hastily, painfully aware of this new audience although they did serve as an effective shield to the intrigued eyes of the Bridge crew beyond the open Ready Room door. "You have my word, Captain. Anything, whatever!"

Normally of great poise herself, Dr Beverly Crusher could only marvel at how easily Captain Jean-Luc Picard could neatly and conveniently forget his sense of regal reserve when it suited him and proved advantageous to his own ends. His wry, pleased smile and release of her shoulders prompted an exasperated yet impish look from the Chief Medical Officer.

"I will get you for this, Jean-Luc Picard," she whispered in a mock snarl as she brushed past him to leave.

"I think you will have to wait your place in line behind Dado," he replied in a low undertone before smiling urbanely, as only he could. The magnificent reserve back in place, he asked, "...Number One?"

Riker was openly amused at the Captain's methods on this occasion, but he straightened his face and said, "Course relaid and set for the Achos cluster, Captain."

"Excellent, Number One. Excellent. Engage at your convenience."

